



**Australian Government**

**Australian Institute of Criminology**

# Missing persons in Australia

**Marianne James  
Jessica Anderson  
Judy Putt**

**Research and Public Policy Series**

**No. 86**



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No. 86



**AFP**  
AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL POLICE



Families and Friends  
of Missing Persons Unit  
Attorney General's  
department of nsw

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## Director's introduction

To go missing is not a crime. However, some missing persons may have been or become victims or perpetrators of crime. As this report highlights it is a complex field, with no single service responsible for investigating missing persons cases, or providing support for those who are found or families and friends of those missing. Police services across Australia play a crucial role in responding to reports of missing persons and this is complemented by nongovernment search agencies such as The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service. Based on information from police and data from these two services, the research estimated that the rate of missing persons in Australia is 1.7 per 1,000 persons. However, until there is greater consistency in collection and recording of data this provides only an approximate estimate based on annual reporting of incidents. For example, it does not account for persons who go missing more than once in a year nor do we know much, at a national level, about the characteristics of those who go missing. Until data quality is improved our understanding of risk factors is severely hampered.

Reasons for going missing can include escape, being lost and forgetful, mental health reasons and foul play. The police data indicate that men and women are equally at risk of going missing but that young people constitute approximately half of all missing persons and that those in care are likely to run away more often than other young people. Based on overseas studies and consultations with key stakeholders it seems certain groups within the community and individual factors are more likely to place people at risk of going missing, as well as making it more challenging to find them. With both adults and young people this can include mental health, drug and alcohol problems, and family conflict and violence. Specific strategies may be required to prevent the elderly or young people in care from going missing and to improve the reporting and investigation of people from Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse communities who may have gone missing. Previous research has estimated that up to 12 people are directly affected by each missing person incident and these family members, friends and colleagues similarly require a sensitive and effective response as they deal with their initial anxiety, and over the longer term, grief and loss.

Since national research on missing persons was first conducted 10 years ago, there has been a range of initiatives that seek to improve our response to missing persons reports. This report provides a framework to further improve policies and practice to ensure there is a coordinated, cross-sectoral and effective approach in the future. This includes specialist training, coordination and the sharing of information across agencies, and increasing awareness among agencies that provide counselling and support services.

**Toni Makkai**  
**Director**  
**Australian Institute of Criminology**



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Insights and comments provided by organisations responsible for searching for missing persons were very valuable, in particular the police missing persons units in all jurisdictions, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation. We would also like to give particular thanks to the families of long-term missing persons who completed the questionnaire. Respondents to the online questionnaire and organisations that participated in the consultations with key informants also provided essential information.

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## Acronyms

<b>ABS</b>	Australian Bureau of Statistics
<b>ACPO</b>	Association of Chief Police Officers (UK)
<b>AFP</b>	Australian Federal Police
<b>AIC</b>	Australian Institute of Criminology
<b>AISRAP</b>	Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention
<b>APMC</b>	Australian Police Ministers' Council
<b>CALD</b>	culturally and linguistically diverse
<b>CPRS</b>	CrimTrac Police Reference System
<b>DFAT</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
<b>FBI</b>	Federal Bureau of Investigation
<b>FFMPU</b>	Family and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (NSW)
<b>FVIP</b>	Family Violence Intervention Program (ACT)
<b>ISS</b>	International Social Service
<b>MPU</b>	missing persons unit
<b>NGO</b>	Nongovernment organisation
<b>NISMART</b>	National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children
<b>NHMRC</b>	National Health and Medical Research Council
<b>NMPCC</b>	National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (formerly National Missing Persons Unit)
<b>NMS</b>	national minimum standards
<b>NSWMPC</b>	NSW Missing Persons Committee
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization



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## Executive summary

### Purpose of the project

- This project was undertaken on behalf of the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (NMPCC), Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU), Attorney General's Department of New South Wales.
- The specific objectives of the project were to update existing data on missing persons from all Australian state and territory sources with a view to identifying at-risk groups; identify good practice in relation to preventative measures, early intervention, support services and referral mechanisms; develop a more networked approach to policy and practice; and identify and establish a solid base for future research.
- The project commenced in July 2006 and was completed in December 2007; it was guided by a Steering Committee comprising representatives from the NMPCC, FFMPU, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, an academic from the University of Tasmania and a family representative.
- The focus of the research was on the national missing persons sector as a whole, and included the police, nongovernment search agencies, the FFMPU and other relevant agencies.

### Methodology

The project methodology comprised the following key elements:

- a review of Australian and overseas research and related literature
- the compilation of national data from police services across Australia, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service for 2005–06
- consultations with key stakeholders, an online questionnaire, face-to-face interviews with representatives of 23 organisations in six jurisdictions, and a questionnaire for families of missing persons
- a national roundtable that included Steering Committee members, representatives from police, search services and academics.

### The missing persons population in Australia

#### *National estimates*

- The estimated number of missing persons in Australia reported by the police and other search agencies (The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service) for the period 2005–06 was approximately 35,000. This is a rate of 1.7 people per 1,000 Australians. This is slightly higher than the previous Australian estimate reported by Henderson and Henderson (1998) of 1.6 per 1,000 of the population.

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- Data quality and availability are significant issues that seriously compromise any attempt to estimate numbers of missing persons. As well as inconsistency in definitions of key variables across jurisdictions and jurisdictional differences in data entry processes, there are no unique identifiers within datasets and no linkages among datasets across jurisdictions for missing persons.
  - Lack of rigorous data from all police jurisdictions as well as from the nongovernment search agencies places limitations on identifying vulnerable groups within the missing persons population.

### *Characteristics*

- The Australian police data indicate that men and women were reported to police as missing almost equally. Young people accounted for just over half of all missing persons reported to police, with 13–17-year-old females most at risk.
- The majority of missing persons reports were from the larger jurisdictions, with more than half coming from New South Wales and Victoria.
- Young people in care are likely to run away more often than the rest of the young missing persons population. Police in all jurisdictions spend a great deal of effort in searching for this group of people.
- Long-term missing persons (those who go missing for six months or longer) are more likely to be adults.

### *Under-reporting*

- It is not possible to accurately estimate the number of unreported missing persons, although certain sub-groups in the population would seem more likely to be unreported. These include homeless people, people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, Indigenous Australians and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, gender questioning, and same sex attraction people.
- Several key reasons for going missing are less likely to be recorded or known by police or search agencies. Respondents to the online questionnaire revealed that child abuse and neglect could be a reason for a young person to go missing, but would not be identified in police records. It is unlikely that families would identify the existence of child abuse when reporting a young person missing. In a similar manner, domestic violence is also unlikely to be revealed.
- It is unlikely that issues surrounding a young person's sexuality would be disclosed. This could particularly be the case in rural communities. This constitutes a hidden, or underestimated, dimension to reasons for going missing and has been under-researched.

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- This research identified that mental health problems, and the associated stigma from their own communities, could be the catalyst for many CALD people to go missing.
  - Many missing Indigenous people may not be reported to the police, but are traced through Indigenous community networks using local knowledge and contacts.

## Reasons for going missing

- In the main, attempts to identify factors associated with the risk of going missing have focused on persons who have decided to go missing (notably young people who go missing) and on adults where there are unintentional absences (notably adults with mental health or incapacity issues).
- Mental health emerged as a consistent theme in all aspects of this research. As well as being highlighted by the families and friends of missing persons as a reason for people going missing, it also featured significantly in the consultations with key stakeholders, in the roundtable discussion and in the police data. Mental health problems, particularly anxiety and depression, appear to be associated more with adult missing persons than young people.

## Adults

- There are no data currently in Australia to comprehensively identify risk factors among the known adult missing persons population, although in 2005–06 New South Wales and South Australia Police recorded more than one-quarter of missing persons with mental health problems. Police data in South Australia for the period 2005–06 also showed that many of the people in the lost/wandered category who had gone missing were aged 65 years or more.
- Previous Australian research has found that reasons for adults going missing included escape, being lost and forgetful, mental health reasons and suicide. Consultations with key stakeholders highlighted mental health problems among the adult CALD and Indigenous missing persons populations. Responses to the online questionnaire indicated that alcohol and illicit drug problems were also often associated with adults going missing.

## Young people

- Police responses to the online questionnaire indicated that the main reasons young people go missing in Australia are due to family dysfunction and conflict or violence, issues associated with puberty and peer pressure, mental health issues, and drug and alcohol problems.

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- Research in Australia has shown that specific risk factors for young people who go missing include domestic violence, family conflict, child abuse and neglect, school problems such as bullying or issues with peers/teachers, illicit drug or alcohol use, mental health issues, racism and poor coping skills.
  - Research in the United Kingdom indicates that one in five young missing persons had been told to leave by a parent.

## **Searching for missing persons**

- The majority of people who are reported as missing in Australia are located within a short period of time. For instance, in Victoria in 2005–06 almost 90 percent of missing persons reported to police were located within seven days.
- Previous research has indicated that only two percent of all missing persons in Australia remain missing for six months or longer (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

### *Key agencies*

- Each police agency in Australia has a designated missing persons unit (MPU). Funded by the Australian Government and situated within the AFP, the NMPCC has the role of coordinating and promoting a national integrated approach to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons.
- Apart from the police there are several nongovernment organisations (NGOs) and government agencies involved with the search for missing persons. Nongovernment search agencies are The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation and the International Social Service (ISS). The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) also assists when people go missing overseas.

### *Risk assessment*

- Risk assessment procedures are particularly important for the police because of the high volume of missing persons reports they receive. Priority ratings for each case are used to determine the degree of risk to which people could be more or less exposed.
- Risk assessment can be divided into high, medium and low risk to determine the priority of the investigation. Categories can include age (children and older people are considered to be in a high-risk category), the harm the person may present to either themselves or the public, and a determination as to whether the behaviour was out of character.



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- Most police jurisdictions expect to respond to at least one missing person report each day, with the larger jurisdictions experiencing a much higher volume. For example, in New South Wales there are at least 25 reports each day, while in Victoria the number of reports is 15 per day, and in the Northern Territory and Tasmania there are between one and two incidents per day.
  - Coordination and sharing of information, including between government and nongovernment sectors, would improve the police response to missing persons reports. This could be particularly useful for those incidents that involve young people in care.
  - Risk assessment procedures for young missing persons have been developed in the United Kingdom and the United States, but have not been separately developed in Australia.
  - The NMPCC is currently working with state and territory police services to formulate national guidelines for the risk assessment of a missing persons report. These should include specific guidelines for young people. Risk assessment procedures also need to be developed by nongovernment search agencies.
  - Appropriate protocols and guidelines for the police, child protection agencies and other government agencies would encourage more useful procedures to prevent some young people going missing in the first place, and would also ease the pressure on police practice.
  - Privacy laws and associated barriers to accessing information can present a significant barrier to investigations/searches for missing persons.

## **Support/counselling services**

- Previous research highlighted the need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons. Support was defined in different ways. Some needed practical search assistance, information and advice, while others needed practical support in the home so that they could concentrate their efforts on searching. Some would have preferred professional counselling from the beginning, while others felt their emotional needs could be met by family and friends (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Similar support needs were identified in this research by the families who completed the questionnaire.
- The FFMPU is the only designated government service in Australia involved in direct service provision through the delivery of counselling, information and referral services for the families and friends of missing persons.
- The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service provides generalist counselling services for families of missing persons, if required, as part of their overall counselling services.

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- Mediating reunions between missing persons after they have been found and their families is an area that requires specialised counselling services. These services often already exist where there has been individual or family dysfunction, and include counselling services and interventions for family violence, child abuse and neglect, illicit drug and alcohol misuse, and mental health.
  - A national approach to supporting those left behind when someone goes missing is currently being developed by the NMPCC with Australian Government funding.

## Early intervention/prevention

- Good practice in early intervention and prevention for missing persons needs to be based on programs that address the risk and protective factors surrounding why people go missing. The lack of consistent and rigorous data collected in Australia relating to missing persons limits the extent to which this report can confidently recommend practices that will reduce the incidence of missing persons or improve service delivery.
- Relevant prevention frameworks that may also apply to young people at risk of going missing include developmental crime prevention and early intervention, prevention of child abuse and neglect, and prevention of youth suicide.
- Good inter-agency collaboration is essential for implementing any missing persons intervention. Examples of successful inter-agency cooperation in Australia are the Family Violence Intervention Project (FVIP) in the Australian Capital Territory and the Joint Investigation Response Team in New South Wales, which is a partnership between the New South Wales Police Force and the Department of Community Services to investigate child abuse and neglect. The research highlights some of the challenges associated with inter-agency collaboration.

## Key priorities

- Data quality is a significant issue that seriously compromises any attempt to estimate the number of missing persons. As well as inconsistency in definitions of key variables across jurisdictions, and jurisdictional differences in data entry processes, there are no unique identifiers for missing persons within datasets and no linkages between datasets across jurisdictions. The need to implement uniform standards in data collection and data recording/entry process across all police agencies should continue to receive immediate attention.
- The poor response rate to the online questionnaire, particularly from nongovernment agencies, could be attributed to the fact that they did not consider missing persons, and their families and friends, as a specific client group.

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- Post-return interviews will, in the short term, provide valuable information on why people go missing.
  - Risk assessment procedures could be further categorised into young people, young people who go missing repeatedly, young people in care, young people in care who go missing repeatedly, adults, adults who go missing repeatedly and long-term missing persons. Appropriate guidelines for the implementation of these risk assessment categories would assist with prioritising missing persons incidents.
  - Specialised training of police and training across other key agencies that may be involved in missing persons incidents has been identified as an important initiative.
  - NGOs, with increased resources, should play a more prominent role in missing persons searches, as well as an increased advocacy and counselling function.
  - The FFMPU is considered a model for the implementation of counselling and support services for missing persons Australia-wide. If resources in other jurisdictions do not allow for the provision of a designated counselling/support agency for missing persons, the inter-agency model implemented by the FFMPU could form the basis of specific protocols and guidelines for partnerships between relevant agencies.
  - Coordination with other relevant agencies, including both the government and nongovernment sectors, would improve the police response to missing persons reports. Excellent models of intervention projects involving the police and other agencies are already in existence, for example in family violence, domestic violence and child abuse intervention models.
  - There is a need to educate agencies that provide counselling/support services in areas such as family violence, child abuse and neglect, illicit drug and alcohol issues, and mental health that part of their client base might include people at risk of going missing.
  - Intervention and prevention projects in Australia show that many of the risk factors for people going missing are already targeted within community service sectors. Identifying, and enhancing current initiatives, rather than creating initiatives, is an effective method for the implementation of strategies to potentially reduce the number of missing persons.
  - The research has identified that mental health problems and associated stigma from their own communities could be the catalyst for CALD people to go missing. More detailed risk factors for CALD people who go missing need to be developed, as well as the identification of more effective support services.
  - More research needs to be conducted into why Indigenous people go missing, and the types of responses and services that would be most appropriate.

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## The way forward

- National research on the missing persons population was conducted 10 years ago. Since then, considerable efforts have been made to improve responses to missing persons reports and include:
  - the establishment in 2000 of the FFMPU in New South Wales
  - an additional \$3.9m from the Australian Government over four years, commencing in 2006, to establish the NMPCC and to support a range of national activities to improve responses to incidents of missing persons across all jurisdictions in Australia, including support for families and the development and dissemination of resources and information
  - the Australasian Police Ministers' Council endorsed the national missing persons policy in June 2006, which provides a framework for the progression of a range of initiatives
  - CrimTrac is progressing an enhanced database to enable more effective sharing of missing persons information across jurisdictions.
- This research has developed a summary flowchart to identify the steps that could further address the gaps in the missing persons agenda. These have been grouped into five related areas of action:
  - police missing persons procedures and data collection
  - family rights, legislation and access to other agencies' information, including reference to improving information sharing among agencies and overcoming any perceived or real barriers as a result of privacy legislation and organisational impediments
  - determination of risk and protective factors, updating procedures and identifying potential partner agencies
  - identifying good practice, implementing strategies and educating police, stakeholders and the public on missing persons
  - application of good practice and intervention models, evaluation and feedback to lead agencies, particularly the NMPCC, for the development of more effective strategies and research.

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## Introduction

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The introduction of Missing Persons Week in 1996 was a considerable impetus to the public profile of missing persons in Australia. This designated week in August each year has focused on targeted awareness-raising strategies and prevention campaigns using national and state media. Just prior to the introduction of the annual campaign, the 'backpacker murders' in New South Wales highlighted the more serious implications associated with the investigation of missing persons. In 2005, missing persons again became prominent when Cornelia Rau, an Australian citizen with a history of mental illness, was detained in police custody and immigration detention for several months despite being listed as missing (Palmer 2005). While such high-profile cases have a considerable impact on both public awareness and the political response to missing persons, the overwhelming majority of those who go missing each year are ordinary people whose circumstances are known only to their circle of family and friends. The diversity of the missing persons population determines the complexity and variety of responses required for each individual case. This response establishes the type of investigation conducted and the support/counselling services required. Although some research in Australia has been concerned with particular aspects of missing persons incidents, there has been very little published on the overarching characteristics of this phenomenon. The studies of Swanton and colleagues in 1988 and Henderson and Henderson in 1998 are exceptions and provide valuable insights.

To go missing is not a crime. This apparently simple statement forms the basis of an exceedingly complex web of behaviours and responses that surround the phenomenon of missing persons. While it is not a crime to go missing, there may be factors relating to the criminal justice system, either underpinning the motives of the missing person or relating to the outcome of the missing person investigation. On the other hand, the explanation may be totally removed from any criminal dimension and could include social problems associated with mental health issues, alcohol use, child psychological abuse, child neglect or parental rejection of a child. It could be a combination of both criminal activities and social problems, for instance domestic violence, child sexual abuse, child physical abuse or illicit drug use. The reasons could be associated with problems at school or peer pressure. The incident may relate to child abduction by an estranged parent or a stranger. It could involve an older person with Alzheimer's disease or dementia. It may be a homicide or a suicide or it could be the result of an accident or misadventure. It could be because of displacement following a war or territorial conflict. The person could have gone missing from a foster home or an institution, or may have gone missing while travelling overseas. Their disappearance may have been reported to either the police or another search service. Their disappearance may not have been reported to anyone at all. The list is seemingly endless.

People who go missing come from all walks of life. They can be young or old, male or female, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, from CALD backgrounds, with intellectual or mental health disabilities, heterosexual, homosexual or transsexual, wealthy or poor. Some people go missing intentionally because they have made the decision that they need to spend time

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away from their normal lives; some go missing involuntarily. People may go missing for a single reason, or they may go missing for a variety of reasons.

Within this myriad of individual, family, institutional and global experiences, appropriate and timely responses are required for each particular case. The challenge for the police is to respond effectively to all reports of missing persons. Thoroughly assessing possible risks is time consuming. Consequently, not only is it important that the correct decision be made by the police in assessing each missing person incident, but it is important that the decision be made promptly. Other family tracing services such as those provided by The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, the ISS and Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation have resource issues typical of all nongovernment services and function on small budgets.

Added to the above is the distress experienced by families, friends and colleagues of the missing persons. The social issues associated with missing persons can be substantial. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to accurately portray the impact of missing persons on families and friends, research undertaken 10 years ago found that physical and mental health problems were significant (Henderson & Henderson 1998). In particular, around 330,000 people across Australia were affected each year as a direct result of people going missing, approximately 12 people for each incident. It was found that 37 percent suffered physical and/or mental health problems, 23 percent sought some type of medical attention and 22 percent experienced a major health impact (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

It was also estimated that both the economic costs of locating missing persons and the associated immediate health and employment-related costs were considerable. Many of the cost components cannot be accurately estimated in financial terms, particularly for emotional suffering and relationship impacts (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Another issue is the need for effective support services for families, friends and colleagues of missing persons, as well as for the missing persons themselves, at all stages of the investigation including after the missing person has been located (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

## Purpose

This project was undertaken on behalf of the NMPCC of the AFP and the FFMPU of the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales. The specific objectives of the project were to:

- update existing data on missing persons from all Australian state and territory sources with a view to identifying at-risk groups, in particular specific characteristics that define missing persons

- 
- identify good practice in relation to preventative measures, early intervention, support services and referral mechanisms
  - develop a more networked approach to policy and practice
  - identify and establish a solid base for future research and areas that would benefit from further research.

## Definition

A social science definition of 'going missing' focuses on absence from social expectations and responsibilities, and includes the following:

... a social situation in which a person is absent from their accustomed network of social and personal relationships to the extent that people within that network define the absence as interfering with the performance by that person of expected social responsibilities, leading to a situation in which members of the network feel obliged to search for the missing person and may institute official procedures to identify the person as missing (Payne 1995: 335).

In the United Kingdom, the definition of missing persons used by the police is 'anyone whose whereabouts is unknown whatever the circumstances of the disappearance' (ACPO 2005: 8). Missing People (formerly the National Missing Persons Helpline) in the United Kingdom recognises both the ACPO and Payne's (2005) definitions of a missing person (Missing People [National Missing Persons Helpline] <http://www.missingpeople.org.uk/media-centre/papers/detail.asp?dsid=603> n.d.).

In Australia, key nongovernment services employ different operational definitions related to different groups of missing persons:

- **The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service** 'locates family members, over 18 years of age, whose current whereabouts are unknown and who are being sought for purpose of re-uniting the family'.
- The **Australian Red Cross Tracing Service** 'locates and reunites missing persons in families separated as a result of war, internal disturbance, natural or other disasters'.
- **Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation** 'exists to enhance the life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by reuniting those over the ages of eighteen years who have experienced enforced separation from their families and communities through adoption, fostering, removal or institutionalisation'.

In Australia, the law enforcement definition of a missing person is 'someone whose whereabouts is unknown and there are serious concerns for their safety and welfare'



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(National Missing Persons Unit 1999?). This definition generally includes anyone reported missing from an institution, but excludes escapees from custody. For the purpose of this report the Australian law enforcement definition of missing persons is followed.

Defining missing persons is particularly significant for service delivery. While there are already practical definitions for all search agencies involved with missing persons, a clear delineation of responsibilities may enable the police particularly to not only streamline their procedures, but to determine whether they are the right agency for the investigation. This raises questions on the role and purpose of the police in missing persons service delivery, particularly in the case of people who go missing from juvenile care and mental health institutions.

## Key agencies

There are several key agencies in Australia involved in investigations or searches for missing persons. These include law enforcement, and government and nongovernment search agencies. A designated counselling service is also available through the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales.

## National coordination

In 2006, the Australian Government provided an additional \$3.9m over four years to establish the NMPCC within the AFP. This centre replaced the National Missing Persons Unit. The NMPCC's mission is to:

- strengthen the cooperative relationships among police, government agencies, NGOs, and families and friends of missing persons
- enhance understanding within the Australian community of the significance of missing persons as an issue
- foster partnerships that facilitate the development of a national strategy on the provision of support to missing persons and their families and friends
- provide information and referrals as required to police, government and nongovernment agencies, and families and friends of missing persons
- conduct and/or commission national research on missing persons
- contribute to international efforts to drive and respond to global issues surrounding missing persons.

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The NMPCC provides leadership, policy development and administrative support to two national committees:

- the **Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons**, which consists of police representatives from all MPUs around Australia and works to standardise and improve the police response to reported missing persons
- the **National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons**, which brings together representatives from police services and various nongovernment tracing services such as The Salvation Army, Australian Red Cross, ISS (Australia) and other services and groups. It is currently being expanded to include a broader range of stakeholders, for example representatives from mental health, CALD people, Indigenous people and young people.

The additional funding provided to the NMPCC provides for a range of initiatives to be developed including:

- working with CrimTrac to progress the development and implementation of a national missing persons capability that will assist police in missing persons investigations
- heightened media advertising campaigns to alert the broader Australian community of the significance of missing persons as an issue
- an interactive website that provides better information as well as e-sighting capacity to allow swift and effective sighting reports
- national research to provide enhanced demographics of the missing persons population with a particular focus on identifying groups at risk of going missing as well as preventative strategies to reduce the incidence
- development of a strategically targeted education and training program for targeted agencies
- promote information sharing among jurisdictions and agencies
- drive and direct national activities
- preventative educative dimensions through improved advertising campaigns and greater community interaction
- development of preventative strategies
- greater engagement with at-risk groups.

The NMPCC contributes to international efforts to drive and respond to missing persons issues. In particular it acts as a conduit between DFAT and the individual jurisdictions.

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## Search agencies

### *Law enforcement*

Reports are taken by the police as soon as there is a concern for the welfare or fears for the safety of a person. The police are the main agency for dealing with missing persons incidents. The number of missing persons incidents that operational police employed in each MPU deal with each day can vary from 25 in New South Wales, 15 in Victoria, to between one and two in the Northern Territory and Tasmania. These figures were obtained by using the statistics provided by the states and territories (at Appendix 2). Reports and investigations are undertaken when there are concerns for the safety and welfare of the missing person.

Police responsibility also includes cases where people have gone missing from mental health institutions, are wards of the state, or are in supervised care. Those who run away from correctional institutions are dealt with as escapees and not as missing persons. In some missing persons incidents, the police work in conjunction with other agencies, for example emergency services and those responsible for family and community services. Apart from police services, there are several nongovernment and government agencies involved with the search for missing persons.

### *Nongovernment*

**The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service** endeavours to locate 'family members, over 18 years of age, whose current whereabouts are unknown and who are being sought for the purpose of re-uniting the family'. Adoption inquiries and inquiries by friends or ex-partners are not generally accepted. It has representatives in all jurisdictions in Australia as part of the overall Salvation Army network. The national office is in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.

**Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation** originally focused exclusively on the 'stolen generation'. However, this focus has broadened to include other categories of missing persons. For instance, Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation is particularly concerned with the disproportionate number of Aboriginal children removed from families by government departments and the courts, and provides support and advocacy for Aboriginal foster carers. Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation is represented in all Australian jurisdictions.

The **Australian Red Cross Tracing Service** is part of the International Red Cross Tracing and Refugee Services and 'locates and reunites missing persons in families separated as a result of war, internal disturbance, natural or other disasters'. The service is usually limited to cases where the inquirer is a close relative, a lifelong friend of a person aged over 60, or war veterans who have served together. The national office is in Melbourne, Victoria.

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**International Social Service** is involved in inter-country complex family and child welfare matters, particularly child abductions. While it is often known where the person is, it is sometimes impossible to arrange for their repatriation to Australia. ISS also provides inter-country casework and advocacy in areas such as family reunification, contact issues, child abduction, international tracing of family of origin, settlement assistance and inter-country adoption. ISS Australia is part of the international network of ISS units.

### *Australian Government*

DFAT assists with inquiries from people who are unable to locate a friend or family member travelling overseas who has lost contact for no apparent reason and grave fears are held for their safety. DFAT works very closely with the NMPCC and Interpol in its efforts to trace missing persons.

### **Specific counselling services**

The FFMPU is situated within the Victims of Crime Bureau in the Attorney General's Department of New South Wales and has been operating since 2000. The purpose of the FFMPU is to coordinate support services within New South Wales for the families and friends of missing persons. The FFMPU works closely with both police and non-police search organisations and has eight main objectives:

- administer funding to NGOs to provide support services to families and friends of missing persons
- establish and maintain an inter-agency forum across government and nongovernment agencies
- provide an information, referral and support service for families and friends of missing persons
- provide a specialist counselling service for families and friends of missing persons
- develop relevant policies
- promote administrative, legislative and social reform
- produce high-quality products to assist families and friends of missing persons
- raise community awareness regarding the issues affecting families and friends of missing persons (FFMPU n.d.).

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## Methodology

This project was approved by the AIC Research Ethics Committee, with advice and support provided by the Steering Committee (more detailed information regarding the research is provided at Appendix 1). The project involved the following key components:

- A **literature search** was undertaken using the resources from the JV Barry Library at the AIC and from CINCH (the Australian criminology database). The review included Australian and international research. The literature review covered the following aspects of missing persons:
  - demographic and social context
  - risk factors
  - good practice models for service delivery
  - good practice models for early intervention programs and preventative strategies
  - policy procedures.
- A **request for data** on missing persons incidents was sent to all police jurisdictions in Australia, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and the ISS. A data checklist form was created to determine the level of data held on all categories of missing persons, as well as to ascertain the manner in which these data were held. To assist in identifying risk factors that may make some people more vulnerable to going missing, the AIC provided a template outlining the type of information to be retrieved. The data period requested was from 1998 to 2006. A request was also made for unit record data. Difficulties in managing data retrieval of this magnitude were identified by all police agencies and the search agencies. Consequently, the data period was refined to the financial year 2005–06.
- An **online questionnaire** (at Appendix 4) was designed to identify:
  - the characteristics of people who go missing
  - early intervention initiatives that may prevent people going missing
  - relevant counselling/support services
  - gaps/barriers in service delivery.

The questionnaire was sent to all members of the Steering Committee for comment. The Steering Committee consisted of representatives from the NMPCC, FFMPU, The Salvation Army, an academic from the University of Tasmania and a family member. A targeted strategy to distribute the survey was developed. Core agencies such as the MPUs in all police jurisdictions as well as The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service were initially identified to complete the survey. Other agencies that offered health and counselling services that might have contact with missing persons

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and their families were also contacted and invited to participate in the survey. However, the reactions and responses from these agencies suggested that they did not consider missing persons and their families and friends to be priorities of the services offered by their organisations. The agencies contacted included Mission Australia, Wayside Chapel, Wesley Mission, Open Family and the Youth Substance Abuse Service. There were 29 responses to the online questionnaire.

At the request of the Steering Committee, a **questionnaire** was distributed to six family members of long-term missing persons who had reported their family member missing to the police and who had indicated to the Committee that they would like to participate in the research (at Appendix 5). A widespread survey of families and friends of missing persons was not planned for this research. The questionnaire included questions relating to the police response and subsequent investigation, as well as the types of support/counselling services provided/needed. Of the six questionnaires distributed, four were completed. The completed questionnaires provide a valuable snapshot of the experiences for particular family members, which varied both in terms of circumstances and the length of time their family member has been missing. The small number of completed questionnaires limits the way in which the information can be used and interpreted. It is acknowledged that the experiences may not be indicative of the experiences of all families of missing persons and it is possible that some experiences may not be accurate reflections of current practice in the missing persons sector.

**Consultations with key stakeholders** were held during the course of the project. Face-to-face interviews were held with the police, search agencies and organisations that provide counselling services and support for all people associated with missing persons. Interviews were also held with relevant government departments in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania to identify investigation/search procedures, specific characteristics of the types of people who were considered most likely to go missing and clarify the particular role that counselling and support services have for missing persons, their families and friends. The extent of face-to-face consultations was limited by the travel budget. In total, representatives from 23 organisations were interviewed (see Appendix 6).

A national **roundtable discussion** was held at the AIC on 12 December 2006. Participants included representatives from the NMPCC, FFMPU, AFP, CrimTrac, Western Australia Police, Victoria Police, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation, Life Change Management, academics from Charles Sturt University, Sydney University and Griffith University, and members of the Steering Committee (see Appendix 7).

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## About this report

This report is divided into six chapters:

- The introduction addresses the background to the complexities involved when a person is reported missing, the purpose of the research, the methodology and definitional issues.
- Chapter 2 discusses the phenomenon of 'going missing', including the risk factors that may influence why people go missing.
- Chapter 3 describes the process involved in searching for missing persons, in particular the police investigation, including risk assessment.
- Chapter 4 addresses support and counselling services for missing persons, their families and friends, and any gaps or barriers that may exist.
- Chapter 5 outlines good practice in relation to early intervention programs, preventative measures and protective measures that may impede people from going missing.
- Chapter 6 presents the way forward, provides a solid basis for future research and outlines policy recommendations.

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## The phenomenon of 'going missing': a research overview

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## How many people go missing

This project has been able to develop a best estimate figure for the number of Australians who go missing each year. The estimate is that in 2005–06, approximately 35,000 Australians went missing, which equates to a rate of approximately 1.7 per 1,000 people. In the United Kingdom, it was estimated that approximately 210,000 people were reported missing to law enforcement agencies and non-police search agencies in 2005 (Missing People [National Missing Persons Helpline] n.d.a), a rate of 3.5 persons per 1,000 population. In 2005 in the United States, where police statistics only are available, 834,536 persons were reported missing to law enforcement agencies, a rate of 2.8 persons per 1,000 population (National Crime Information Center n.d.).

In 1985, Swanton and colleagues (1988) reported that the police investigated 23,783 incidents of people missing across Australia – a rate of 1.5 persons per 1,000 Australians. More recent research found that in 1997, 28,791 people were reported missing to the police, also a rate of 1.5 persons per 1,000 (Henderson & Henderson 1998). When the number of reported incidents of missing persons included those registered with non-police search agencies, the rate increased slightly to 1.6 persons per 1,000 population (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

An examination of the data received from state and territory police in Australia (excluding Queensland) for the period 2005–06 indicated that the rate of missing persons reported to the police was 1.5 per 1,000 Australians (see Table 1). There were almost equal numbers of males and females, and young people accounted for just over half of all missing persons. When this is added to the figures provided by the non-police search agencies such as The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service (2,500 incidents) and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service (2,098 incidents), the rate of missing persons in Australia for the period of 2005–06 increased to 1.7 per 1,000 Australians. This equates to approximately 35,000 people (including an estimate for Queensland). It must be emphasised that a number of missing persons incidents may refer to one person who has gone missing several times – not all jurisdictions are able to identify those who may go missing repeatedly in the one year.

**Table 1: Missing persons reported to the police, 2005–06**

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Total missing</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Young people</b>	<b>Rate<sup>a</sup></b>
ACT	1,078	504	574	738	3.3
NSW	9,788	5,080	4,708	5,068	1.4
NT	431	207	224	233	2.1
Qld <sup>b</sup>	5,768	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	2.8
SA	4,915	2,532	2,383	2,923	3.2
Tas	207	113	94	n.a.	0.4
Vic <sup>c</sup>	5,584	2,801	2,766	2,877	1.1
WA	2,517	1,265	1,252	1,035	1.2
Australia	30,288	12,502	12,001	12,874	1.5

a: Rate per 1,000 population based on 2006 ABS population estimates

b: Total numbers for Queensland could not be obtained therefore an estimate was calculated based on previous numbers of missing persons in the state as well as an average of percentage increases in other jurisdictions. This number was used to calculate the rate for Queensland, and also in the calculation of the total missing for Australia

c: The male/female breakdown of missing persons does not match the total missing for Victoria due to missing data

n.a. = Not available

Source: State and territory police statistics provided to the AIC; Victoria Police Crime Statistics 2005–06

As would be expected, the majority of missing persons reports were from the larger jurisdictions, with more than half coming from New South Wales and Victoria (see Appendix 2 for state and territory police statistics). However, different reporting practices across the jurisdictions make comparisons problematic. For instance, in the Australian Capital Territory, which appeared to have a high rate of missing persons incidents, more than half involved people who went missing from juvenile care, mental health institutions and schools, and a proportion of these missing persons were possibly recidivist missing persons. In South Australia, more than one-third of missing persons incidents were from supported care, mental health institutions and juvenile care. In a similar manner as the Australian Capital Territory, several could have been recidivist missing persons. The high rate of missing persons incidents in South Australia was also noted in other research, and was then attributed to differences in jurisdictional reporting practices (Swanton et al. 1988). Henderson and Henderson (1998) noted that both South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory had high rates of missing persons incident reports. They attributed this to the large number of ‘absconders’ in these jurisdictions and also the fact that South Australia is the only jurisdiction to take missing person reports over the telephone. It should be noted however, that the definition of ‘absconder’ varies across jurisdictions and caution should be exercised in making comparisons among jurisdictions.

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The majority of people who go missing in Australia are located within a short period of time. For example, in Victoria in 2005–06, almost 90 percent of missing persons were located within seven days, while Henderson and Henderson (1998) reported that only two percent of missing persons across all Australian jurisdictions were still missing after six months. While this seems to be a small percentage, it equates to around 700 people across Australia. The long-term missing attract limited public attention and the point was made by Henderson and Henderson (1998) that road traffic deaths and suicides, which have much lower rates than missing persons, generally attract a lot more interest.

It must also be emphasised that the reported number of missing persons incidents in all Australian jurisdictions does not accurately reflect the total number of missing persons. The main reason for this is that some people choose not to report their missing relatives or friends to the police or other search agencies (see Henderson & Henderson 1998; Swanton et al. 1988). In the United States, it has been estimated that only one-fifth of all young people who go missing were reported to the police. Reasons for not reporting included that some parents wanted to avoid police involvement or because they had a negative experience when reporting a previous episode to the police (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak 2002).

This research identified limitations in data collection and availability across all police jurisdictions, similar to previous research (Henderson & Henderson 1998; Swanton et al. 1988). CrimTrac is currently involved in improving the data quality and national accessibility of missing persons nationally. The limitations in police data are as follows:

- inconsistency in definitions of key variables across jurisdictions
- jurisdictional differences in data recording processes
- jurisdictional differences in data entry processes
- data not able to be verified in some jurisdictions
- lack of quality control
- recidivist missing persons not able to be identified
- vulnerable groups not able to be identified
- inconsistency in the recording of location rates
- unit record data not able to be obtained.

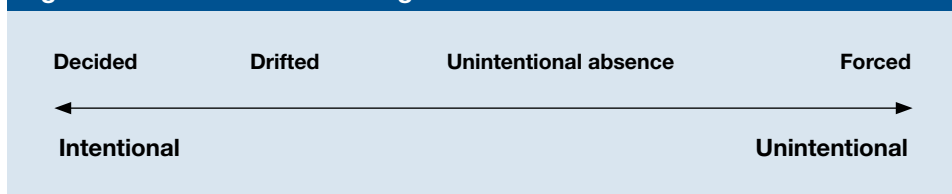
Several key tracing services were not able to provide data. These included ISS, Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation and DFAT. Although a DFAT representative estimated that between eight and 10 incidents of missing persons were reported to DFAT each week. Most of these were resolved within 48 hours and only a small number (approximately 10) were under investigation at any one time.

## Why do people go missing?

To understand why people go missing, it is necessary to assess the risk factors involved for each of the different categories within the missing persons population. Risk factors have been broadly defined as ‘those characteristics, variables or hazards that, if present for a given individual, rather than someone selected from the general population, will develop a disorder’ (Mrazek & Haggerty 1994: 127). A risk factor is therefore anything that increases the probability that a person will be more prone to specific types of harmful behaviour or will experience some type of harm.

While the terms 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' have been used extensively in the literature, there are some complexities surrounding them, particularly as people who have been living in violent and abusive situations or who are mentally ill can be classified as going missing 'voluntarily'. In these cases, the people concerned often had no choice or control over their behaviour and could therefore also be deemed to have left involuntarily. To overcome this, it has been suggested that the categories 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' not be used. Instead a continuum of 'missingness', common to young people and adults, was proposed (Figure 1) (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003). This ranges from intentional to unintentional absence, with intervals spanning 'decided' (relationship breakdown, escaping personal problems, escaping violence and mental health problems), to 'drifted' (losing contact and a transient lifestyle, which means that people simply lose touch with their families and friends), to 'unintentional absence' (Alzheimer's disease, other mental health problems, accident or misadventure, and miscommunication) to 'forced' (being a victim of crime such as homicide).

### Figure 1: Continuum of missingness



Source: Adapted from Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003

Key risk factors identified in the overseas research for all people who go missing include mental health factors (for example, schizophrenia, depression and anxiety), illicit drug and alcohol use, and family violence/conflict. Child abuse and neglect were dominant risk factors for children and young people, while Alzheimer's disease and dementia appeared to be significant risk factors for older people. Risk factors are often inter-related and cut across all sections of the community. Other risk factors for both young people and adults are outlined in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

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## Young people

Research on missing persons has historically focused on children and young people, particularly in the United States where the majority of missing young people constitute almost 90 percent of police missing persons reports and where running away is a status offence (violations of laws with which only children can be charged). Until recently, research in the United Kingdom, where just over half of all people reported missing were young people, has also predominantly been concerned with this category. The proportion of young people reported missing in Australia is similar to the United Kingdom.

### *United States*

In the United States a large amount of media and public attention is given to child abductions and in 2002 almost one-third of missing young people were in this category, with the majority (71%) abducted by family members (National Center for Missing and Exploited Children n.d.). During the late 1980s, missing children began to attract prominence in the United States as a result of intense lobbying to Congress and the federal government by advocacy groups (Best 1990). Initially, most concern was focused on children who had been abducted, whether by strangers or family members. After a while 'runaway' children were also included, partly because there were so many and partly because it was not always easy to distinguish among the different groups. As a result, legislation subdivided missing children into three main groups – those abducted by strangers, those abducted by family members and those who ran away. Those who ran away were referred to as the 'voluntary missing' (Forst & Blomquist 1991).

In 1989, research on the incidence of missing children and adolescents under 18 years of age was commissioned by the United States Department of Justice through the National Incidence Study of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children. This study is referred to as NISMART-1 (Finkelhor, Hotelling & Sedlak 1990). The children in this study were classified according to whether they had run away, were lost, injured or otherwise missing, were abducted by a family member, were a 'thrownaway', were a victim of non-family abduction or were a victim of attempted abduction. The research included six distinct data collection and data analysis tools:

- household telephone survey
- survey of juvenile residential facilities, including boarding schools and group homes
- survey of young missing persons when found
- analysis of police records
- re-analysis of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) data on child homicide
- community professionals' study (Finkelhor, Hotelling & Sedlak 1990).

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As a result, four additional missing persons categories were identified. These were:

- children missing due to injury or accident
- children missing due to delinquent and rebellious behaviour
- children who had become lost
- miscommunication among adult caregivers.

It was considered that two of these categories – injured and lost children – should particularly be included in missing children's typologies because of their potential seriousness. Vulnerability to all four kinds of categories was associated with certain family characteristics and it was suggested that many were the result of more complex family dynamics. As well as requiring help in locating their children, these families often needed other forms of support or counselling (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990). The research also examined 354,100 child abductions that occurred during 1988 and found that around one percent of the children were abducted by non-family members and strangers. In these cases, a child was taken and ransomed, seriously injured or killed. Two-thirds of the non-family abductions involved sexual assault.

One of the main conclusions of this significant research was that a variety of different child welfare and criminal justice problems – family abductions, runaways, throwaways and stranger abductions – had all been grouped together without any particular social policy delineation. For example, the report highlighted the differences among the types of missing children, particularly that runaway children and family-abducted children were of different ages, were at different kinds of risks and were dealt with by different social agencies. It was concluded that each of the very different, very distinct categories of missing children needed to be researched, analysed and treated separately (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990).

NISMART-1 made particular reference to the fact that large numbers of children in the United States were in crisis. Even in 1990, over one million children experienced a parental divorce, over a million-and-a-half were identified as abused or neglected, three million were estimated to be severely emotionally disturbed, over 12 million lived in poverty, over 10,000 had a sexually transmitted disease and up to 20,000 were infected with the AIDS virus (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990). Children and adolescents in the study were highlighted because of the circumstances that put them at risk of separation from their caregivers. They were not new children and new problems. Many of these children had been identified before in the figures of other problems – what was now seen was 'a different part of their crisis, but it was not a new crisis or their entire crisis' (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990: 132). Thirty-six percent of runaways were recidivist missing persons (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990).

In a second study referred to as NISMART-2, the categories observed in NISMART-1 were re-assessed to more accurately reflect missing persons and the different reasons for going missing (Sedlak et al. 2002). The main categories analysed were runaways/throwaways,

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non-family abductions, family abductions, and lost and involuntary missing. The types of missing children/adolescents identified by the NISMART studies were often cited in the literature and regarded as the standard to categorise missing persons under the age of 18 years.

Most young people who went missing were older teenagers aged between 15 and 17 years, with only about one-quarter aged 14 years or younger (Hammer, Finkelhor & Sedlak 2002). Young people of different races ran away at about the same rates, and boys and girls ran away in equal proportions. Although young people from all socioeconomic groups ran away, the majority were from lower-income backgrounds, possibly because of the additional family stress created by lack of income and resources (Posner 2000). Blended families also experienced additional stress, which may explain why young people living in these families were also more likely to run away (Finkelhor, Hotelling & Sedlak 1990). Young people who went missing had higher rates of depression, physical and sexual abuse, alcohol and drug problems, delinquency, school problems and difficulties with peers than young people who did not run away (Posner 1992). Many young people who went missing had been exposed to high levels of violence, either as victims or as witnesses (Kipke et al. 1997). The rates that young people went missing were similar in urban, suburban and rural settings (General Accounting Office 1989).

Other research has also highlighted the fact that issues surrounding young people going missing was particularly complex because there were often other social problems, such as family dysfunction and child abuse issues to be taken into consideration (Dedell 2006). As a result, police were only able to deal with one part of the problem. While young people who go missing were once believed to be seeking adventure or rebelling against mainstream values and authority of their parents, they had more recently been regarded as victims of dysfunctional families, schools and social service institutions. In fact, it could be misguided and potentially dangerous to suggest that there was a stereotype of young people running away to experience a carefree and rebellious lifestyle. They were usually running away from a problem they did not know how to solve, rather than running away to a perceived more exciting environment (Dedell 2006). Young people ran away from families that often could not work through their problems. Lacking other coping mechanisms or communication strategies to resolve problems, young people often ran away when they felt they had no other option. In particular, young people ran away when the pattern of conflict escalated, the risk of physical harm increased, or family life became intolerable (Dedell 2006). It was more likely that involvement in antisocial behaviour and crimes such as prostitution and illegal drug use could be the result of running away (Dedell 2006).

The triggers underlying an episode of a young person running away from foster care or a group home were different from the reasons young people ran away from their own homes. Young people in care often did not have strong emotional ties to their caregivers and found it easier to leave. Young people ran away from care to:

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- return home to their own neighbourhood to spend time with friends or family
  - attract attention or provoke a reaction to confirm that caretakers cared about them and that they were wanted
  - escape crowded facilities or to seek privacy
  - emphasise inadequate service or attention from caregivers/social workers
  - escape bullying or sexual harassment by other residents
  - escape abuse by staff
  - protest against imposed limits, particularly as they may have come from homes with few limits (Dedel 2006).

### *Canada*

Research on missing young people in Canada in 2005 has shown the following:

- more than three-quarters of the total number of missing children reports were runaways, with females making up the majority
- eight out of 10 of the reports involved children aged between 14 and 17 years
- three-quarters of the reports indicated repeat or habitual characteristics of being missing
- 32 percent of the children went missing from their family residence, 14 percent from child care and 21 percent from foster care
- 26 percent of the children went missing from institutions, including school, detention and youth centres
- less than one percent went missing from a shopping mall, place of work or while on vacation
- two-thirds of all missing children were found in the first 24 hours of being reported missing and 90 percent were returned within a week
- more than three-quarters of the children who went missing did so more than once (CPIC n.d.).

### *United Kingdom*

Research in the United Kingdom also confirmed that family dysfunction, child abuse and neglect were significant predictors of young runaway behaviour. However, many of the categories identified in the literature from the United States have been refined by studies in the United Kingdom to include risk factors for young missing persons who go missing repeatedly, whether in care or not.



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Missing People (National Missing Persons Helpline) (n.d.b) reported that one-third of young people who go missing accounted for three-quarters of the missing persons reports each year for those aged less than 18. When the motives and experiences of people reported missing to Missing People (an NGO) were examined, it was concluded that two-thirds of young people less than 18 years went missing of their own free will. However, their decision was often precipitated by a range of push factors, for example a breakdown in personal relationships, abuse/conflict at home or problems at school. Some 16–17-year-olds left due to a breakdown in relationships with parents, often remaining missing for several years (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003). In other cases, people went missing in order to participate in activities that were either illegal or likely to increase the risks they faced while missing, for example involvement in prostitution, illicit drug-taking and offending (Newiss 1999). These pull factors were often linked to peer group pressure or the influence of another individual (Newiss 1999). When young people had been away for a week or more, the chance of them coming to some type of harm was almost 50 percent, with almost two-thirds of this number being harmed by someone they had just met. Some young missing people experienced physical or sexual assault while missing (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003).

Further research on children who went missing from their own homes revealed that the greatest risks included those who had:

- run away once or twice due to abusive behaviour from their carers
- run away once or twice due to depression
- run away three or more times, especially if the first time was before the age of 11
- become detached from their families for lengthy periods of six months or more
- a relationship breakdown with their carers had forced them to leave (one-fifth of young people running away from home had been forced to leave) (Biehal & Wade 2004).

Most young people only ran away once or twice, but a substantial minority went missing more than this. It was found that young people who repeatedly went missing were:

- at the greatest risk of depression, offending, detachment from school, and drug or alcohol abuse
- more likely to have emotional and behavioural difficulties
- more likely to have often experienced severe family problems and disruption or abuse
- more likely to experience adult homelessness (Biehal & Wade 2004).

The potential significance of repeated episodes of going missing has been emphasised (Hedges 2002). Often such children were immediately labelled as the problem and insufficient consideration was given to why they persistently went missing. The reasons that some children went missing repeatedly need to be explored, particularly at the time of post-return interviews.

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Research in the United Kingdom showed that young people in substitute care (for example foster care, group homes) were more likely to run away than young people who lived at home with a parent or guardian. The chances of young people in care running away were highest in the first few months after placement, and older young people were more likely to run away than younger young people (Kaplan 2004). Furthermore, young people who ran away from substitute care were more likely to run away repeatedly than young people who ran away from home (Wade et al. 1998). Although they were only a small proportion of the total number of young missing persons, those who ran away from care consumed a disproportionate amount of police time and effort. These young people also tended to stay away longer and travel further away than those who ran away from home (Wade et al. 1998).

A study of 166 youths at a shelter for adolescents examined first-time runaways versus repeat runaways, and child and family influences on recidivism (Baker et al. 2003). Results showed different pathways to shelter use and return within a 12-month period between these sub-groups. Youth emotional problems were significantly related to recidivism for young people who ran away repeatedly, whereas family changes (for instance, a new de facto parent) and length of stay at the shelter were significantly related to the first time young people went missing more than once. Young people who go missing repeatedly were more likely to:

- be female
- report school problems
- report higher levels of family conflict
- report higher levels of parental strictness
- have changes in their family dynamics (for example, remarriage or a de facto parent)
- have emotional problems.

In another study of children who ran away while in care, 60 percent went missing for one day or less. Two-thirds of those who went missing for longer periods were aged between 11 and 13 years and were often living on the streets (Biehal & Wade 2004). Almost one-third of children in care ran away three times or more. Biehal and Wade (2004) identified the following risk factors for this group of children:

- going missing from home before going into care (half of the children had gone missing from home before being looked after)
- differences in the management, regimes and cultures of individual children's homes can make young people either more or less likely to go missing
- being upset about separation from families and friends (half go missing to be with friends or, to a lesser extent, families)
- having little previous experience of boundaries being set for their behaviour

- 
- being overwhelmed by the pressures of institutional life
  - being influenced by friends within and outside placements
  - using going missing as a safety valve or cry for help.

Most incidents of child abduction in the United Kingdom involved the child being taken by a parent due to a custody dispute. The number of child abductions by parents has increased by almost 80 percent since 1995. Abduction by a stranger or non-family member is rare and very few cases involve the abduction and murder of a child (Missing People [National Missing Persons Helpline] n.d.c).

### *Australia*

Previous Australian research has highlighted the risks involved for young people, both as a reason to run away in the first place and the risks they faced while being away (Swanton et al. 1988). This research described the reasons young people ran away as:

- disturbed and poorly adjusted children being dissatisfied with home life
- pressure from friends
- problems outside the home such as poor results in school
- being rejected by family
- wanting a more stimulating lifestyle
- problems with parents or caregivers, such as excessive discipline, sexual abuse or violence.

In a similar manner to subsequent research from the United Kingdom, this category of young missing persons was divided into the push–pull dichotomy. There were those who were attracted to life on the streets and the sense of freedom and adventure that pulled them from the security of their homes. The others were pushed out by their home circumstances and felt that they could not return.

Other research in Australia found that the most specific reasons for young people going missing were centred on common adolescent/family issues such as rebellion, conflict, peer pressure and wanting to be independent, with 30 percent of young people in this category (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Special needs also included attention deficit disorder, and hyperactivity or behavioural disorders. These were identified in eight percent of responses to a survey of families and friends of missing persons (Henderson & Henderson 1998). The study also found that over half of all children and young people had gone missing more than once, and in many cases these incidents were not referred to the police. Overall, a small proportion of children and young people appeared to account for a disproportionate number of missing persons reports to the police. The number of young recidivist missing persons

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could also be under-represented in police statistics because families often did not report these to the police (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

An analysis of data collected from archived police files located in the NSW MPU revealed the following characteristics of young missing persons:

- under 18 years of age
- living with parents
- a student
- last seen at home
- behaving in a way that was not out of character
- running away was suspected
- he or she was socially rebellious
- there was a history of running away
- short and long-term stressors (Foy 2006).

Statistics obtained from police agencies for the period 2005–06 indicated that young people accounted for just over half of the missing persons population (see Table 1). Young females consistently outnumbered young males with figures in New South Wales showing that twice as many reported incidents involved young females going missing, although it is not known how many might involve individuals who have gone missing more than once within the year. New South Wales Police Force statistics also showed that 13–15-year-olds were at the highest risk of running away. Comparable data from South Australia showed that the increased number of young females going missing is a recent phenomenon. This is consistent with research in the United Kingdom, which reported that girls aged between 13 and 17 years were the most likely group of young people to be reported missing and were twice as likely to go missing as boys in this age group (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003).

Police statistics also indicated that the number of young people running away from youth institutions or supervised accommodation when under some sort of care or control order was high, although once again caution should be exercised here because of different reporting requirements or practices. For instance, in the Australian Capital Territory, three-quarters of all young missing persons incidents were classified as 'absconders', defined as going missing from juvenile care, a mental health institution or school. While in South Australia where the definition of an 'absconder' refers to a state ward who has gone missing from one of the Families SA assessment units, almost one-third were in this category, with a further 20 percent of all young people going missing from supportive care and eight percent going missing from an education facility. In New South Wales, one-third of all young people who went missing were in the care of the Department of Community Services.

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Police responses to the online questionnaire emphasised that youths running away from youth care facilities accounted for a high proportion of their missing persons incidents and consumed a disproportionate amount of resources. This point was also emphasised in the roundtable discussions. They highlighted that young people can go missing for reasons such as issues associated with puberty and peer pressure, mental health issues, drug and alcohol problems, and family dysfunction (including such factors as child abuse and neglect, family violence and family conflict). It must, however, be emphasised that the majority of young people who have been placed in care have experienced some type of family problem or abuse and it is these underlying issues that also need to be addressed.

A study by the Gumurrii Centre at Griffith University analysed 133 files of young Aboriginal females who had been reported missing to police in New South Wales during 2002. Qualitative research was also undertaken through one-on-one interviews with five young Aboriginal females aged between 12 and 15 years, and focus groups were conducted with more than 50 family, friends and community members (Robertson & Demosthenous 2004). Results of the research included the following:

- 12–15-year-old females comprised the majority of missing persons cases
- females were missing voluntarily in most cases.

Focus groups with family, friends and communities identified that police were not the main agency used to locate a missing person. Initially families and friends were consulted on the whereabouts of the missing person and it was only when all of these avenues were exhausted that the police were notified. In a number of cases, missing persons were never reported to the police. Reasons for this included fear of police and the potential for charges to be laid against either the missing person and/or the family member filing the report. Further, a number of people attending the focus group meetings revealed a common (mis) understanding that there was a required 24-hour waiting period for reports on missing persons to be actioned (Robertson & Demosthenous 2004).

The report also highlighted how the analysis of data can assist by identifying factors that were not significant, for example, the risk of Indigenous young people being reported as going missing seemed to be fairly evenly spread across regional and urban New South Wales (Robertson & Demosthenous 2004). Several risk factors were found to cumulate as reasons for Indigenous young people to go missing. These included:

- difficult and often traumatic family circumstances
- poor performance and/or conflict at school
- inter-related home and school problems
- problems at home, including violence, alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, safety concerns, abduction by non-custodial parent
- problems at school related to learning, racism and bullying.

Although these risk factors might apply to non-Indigenous children and young people, the Indigenous population is more likely to experience social disadvantage and other social problems. For example, Indigenous children and youth are under-represented in the education system, with reduced participation, retention and success rates across all education sectors (SCRGSP 2007).

*Key risk factors*

Table 2 outlines the potential risk factors identified in this research for young missing persons. It must be emphasised that these are by no means exhaustive. They are an amalgamation of risk factors identified through the literature review, consultations with key stakeholders, the online questionnaire, the questionnaire for families of missing persons and the roundtable discussion. Table 3 outlines the potential risk factors associated with young people who were at the greatest risk of going missing repeatedly, including young people in care. For these categories of young people, the intention to go missing has been labelled as ‘decided’ in all cases. In these incidents, the nature of going missing repeatedly or going missing from care means that the events would most likely have been precipitated by relationship breakdown, escaping personal problems or escaping violence. Biehal, Mitchell and Wade (2003) include these reasons in the ‘decided’ category in the ‘continuum of missingness’. This group of young missing persons, particularly those who abscond from care or an institution, consumes the greatest amount of police resources and was identified in the online questionnaire and the roundtable discussion as the group who are at a very high risk of going missing.

The potential risk factors for young people (Table 2) have many inter-related variables with adult missing persons (see Table 5). Appropriate responses to the investigation of young missing persons incidents, and the identification of appropriate early intervention and preventative measures require that the missing persons population be divided into the separate categories that reflect the risk factors involved.

Table 2: Risk factors for young missing persons			
Decided	Drifted	Unintentional	Forced
<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Running away</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Running away</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Miscommunication</li><li>• Accident/ misadventure/ accidental death</li><li>• Mental health problems</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Forced to leave home (parental rejection)</li><li>• Homicide/foul play</li><li>• Abduction (parent/ stranger)</li></ul>
<b>Age (highest risk)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• &lt;10 years (males and females)</li><li>• 13–17 years (females particularly)</li></ul>	<b>Age (highest risk)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• &lt;10 years (males and females)</li><li>• 13–17 years (females particularly)</li></ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• &lt;17 years</li></ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 13–16 years</li><li>• &lt;17 years</li></ul>

**Table 2: continued**

<b>Decided</b>	<b>Drifted</b>	<b>Unintentional</b>	<b>Forced</b>
<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic violence</li> <li>• Parent–child conflict</li> <li>• Divorce/separation</li> <li>• Child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect)</li> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• School problems (bullying/poor performance)</li> <li>• Peer pressure/difficulties with peers</li> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Lower-income families</li> <li>• Blended families</li> </ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic violence</li> <li>• Parent–child conflict</li> <li>• Divorce/separation</li> <li>• Child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, neglect)</li> <li>• Racism</li> <li>• School problems (bullying/poor performance)</li> <li>• Peer pressure/difficulties with peers</li> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Lower-income families</li> <li>• Blended families</li> </ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Child sexual abuse</li> </ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived antisocial behaviour</li> <li>• Gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender</li> <li>• CALD background</li> <li>• Parental divorce/separation</li> <li>• Child custody issues</li> </ul>
<b>Other factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Anxiety/depression</li> <li>• ADHD</li> <li>• Poor coping skills</li> <li>• Detached from families for six months or more</li> </ul>	<b>Other factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health</li> <li>• Anxiety/depression</li> <li>• ADHD</li> <li>• Poor coping skills</li> </ul>		
<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prostitution</li> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Criminal offending</li> <li>• Mental health problems</li> <li>• Possible suicide</li> <li>• (Absent one week or more, 50% chance of experiencing some type of harm)</li> <li>• Family reconciliation</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prostitution</li> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Criminal offending</li> <li>• Mental health problems</li> <li>• Possible suicide</li> <li>• (Absent one week or more, 50% chance of experiencing some type of harm)</li> <li>• Family reconciliation</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possible suicide</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term homelessness</li> <li>• Prostitution</li> <li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li> <li>• Criminal offending</li> <li>• Mental health problems</li> <li>• Suicide</li> <li>• (Absent one week or more, 50% chance of experiencing some type of harm)</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>

**Table 3: Risk factors for young people who go missing repeatedly, young people in care and young people in care who go missing repeatedly**

Decided	Decided	Decided
Young recidivists	Young people in care	Young people in care and recidivism
<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Running away repeatedly from home</li> </ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Run away from care (first few months after placement, perceived inadequate attention from caregivers, social workers, crowded facilities)</li> <li>Return home (most had previously run away from home)</li> <li>Return to friends/boyfriend</li> <li>Miscommunication</li> <li>Adjustment/attachment difficulties</li> <li>Caregivers know whereabouts but are obligated to inform police</li> </ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Run away from care (perceived inadequate attention from caregivers/social workers, crowded facilities)</li> <li>Return home</li> <li>Return to friends/boyfriend</li> <li>Miscommunication</li> <li>Caregivers know whereabouts but are obligated to inform police</li> <li>Adjustment/attachment difficulties</li> </ul>
<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13–17 years of age</li> </ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13–17 years of age (more likely to be female)</li> </ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13–17 years of age (more likely to be female)</li> </ul>
<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Severe family problems</li> <li>Severe family disruption</li> <li>Severe child abuse</li> <li>Severe school problems</li> </ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <p><i>Family</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Severe family problems</li> <li>Severe family disruption</li> <li>Severe child abuse</li> <li>Severe school problems</li> <li>Emotional/behavioural difficulties</li> <li>Changes in family dynamics</li> </ul> <p><i>Care</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying/sexual harassment</li> <li>Abusive staff</li> <li>Protest against imposed limits</li> <li>Cry for help</li> </ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <p><i>Family</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Severe family problems</li> <li>Severe family disruption</li> <li>Severe child abuse</li> <li>Higher levels of parental strictness</li> <li>Severe school problems</li> <li>Emotional/behavioural difficulties</li> <li>Changes in family dynamics</li> </ul> <p><i>Care</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bullying/sexual harassment</li> <li>Abusive staff</li> <li>Protest against imposed limits</li> <li>Cry for help</li> </ul>



**Table 3: continued**

<b>Decided</b>	<b>Decided</b>	<b>Decided</b>
<b>Young recidivists</b>	<b>Young people in care</b>	<b>Young people in care and recidivism</b>
<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased risk of mental health problems/depression</li> <li>• Increased risk of leaving school</li> <li>• Increased risk of offending</li> <li>• Increased risk of illicit drug and alcohol use</li> <li>• More likely to experience adult homelessness</li> <li>• More likely to subsume police resources</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased risk of mental health problems/depression</li> <li>• Increased risk of leaving school</li> <li>• Increased risk of offending</li> <li>• Increased risk of illicit drug and alcohol use</li> <li>• Could be living on the streets</li> <li>• More likely to experience adult homelessness</li> <li>• More likely to subsume police resources</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased risk of mental health problems/depression</li> <li>• Increased risk of leaving school</li> <li>• Increased risk of offending</li> <li>• Increased risk of illicit drug and alcohol use</li> <li>• More likely to experience adult homelessness</li> <li>• More likely to subsume police resources</li> <li>• Could be living on the streets</li> <li>• Victim of crime</li> </ul>

## Adults

Limited research has been conducted on adult missing persons and there is a dearth of statistical information and analysis. Research in the United Kingdom identified that males between the ages of 24 and 30 years were the most likely adult group to be reported missing (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003). Adults were more likely to go missing if they were going through a crisis or difficult transition or they were vulnerable due to chronic difficulties. Two-thirds went missing intentionally to escape problems such as relationship breakdowns, violence and financial problems; almost one in five drifted into going missing because they simply lost contact or led a transient lifestyle; one in six left unintentionally as a result of Alzheimer's disease, dementia, other mental health problems, accident or miscommunication; and one percent were the victim of a crime such as homicide (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003). In an analysis of long-term missing persons (those missing for one year or more) it was found that adult males were more likely to remain missing for a substantial period of time than other groups of missing persons (Newiss 2005).

A study in the United Kingdom examined a representative sample of 1,008 missing persons cases and found that only 10 were still missing after 12 months (Tarling & Burrows 2004). A further 29 were found, but not safe and well. These 39 cases were combined with 93 other specifically selected problematic cases to form a significant cohort of problem cases. The crucial question was whether there were any characteristics of these cases that separated them from the less problematic ones. Of the 10 people not found, only five appeared to be genuinely missing persons and none of them seemed to be the subject of continuing police

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concern. One was a refugee, one file was not completed, and two were wanted in connection with criminal offences and were described as unlawfully at large. The fifth was a shopkeeper who was in severe financial difficulties and it was believed that he had gone to the United States to escape his creditors. Of the five cases that were no longer regarded as missing persons, one had been passed to another division and the others were no longer missing persons.

Of those who were not found safe and well, 15 were found dead, either from natural causes or suicide. Of the 14 who were found injured or ill, five had taken an overdose and the remaining nine were found injured or unconscious in the street or at home. It seems that in all but two or three of the 29 incidents, the person's fate had been determined before the police were notified. In the two deaths where full information was recorded, the police only had an hour-and-a-half and four hours, respectively, in which to influence the course of events. Of the 30 cases outstanding for more than one year, two-thirds were women and only two were aged less than 20 years – their characteristics were much different from those of other groups. Seventeen of the problem cases involved immigration matters (Tarling & Burrows 2004).

The conclusion from this study was that given the inevitable limitations of any risk prediction score, the police will always be required to exercise a good deal of professional judgement in missing persons cases, albeit informed by any available and usable empirical evidence on the risks of different outcomes (Tarling & Burrows 2004). The Metropolitan Police and more recently the Association of Chief Police Officers have developed guidelines that adopt this approach by placing greater emphasis on the professional judgement of officers handling the case and on putting in place procedures that ensure all circumstances surrounding the case are considered in an appropriate manner (ACPO 2002, 2005). In view of the variety of cases and the rarity of adverse outcomes, it is difficult to develop statistical risk prediction scores as an aid to decision making.

## *Australia*

Two landmark studies in Australia undertaken by Swanton and colleagues (1988) and Henderson and Henderson (1998) are noteworthy. Lack of available international and Australian research on missing persons at the time and the paucity of police data meant that research by Swanton and colleagues (1988) was not able to identify risk factors for particular groups of missing persons. The strength of this study, however, was that it placed missing persons on the policy agenda and highlighted the extent of the problem. The later study by Henderson and Henderson (1998) also did not attempt to provide any form of categorisation for missing persons, but did recognise some of the reasons for going missing. For adults, these included missing to escape, missing to suicide, missing for adventure, missing due to being lost and forgetful, and missing due to mental health reasons.

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In a recent study of 357 missing persons cases, 26 variables were identified as relevant to pre-disappearance behaviour and circumstances surrounding the incident (Foy 2006). The variables reflected demographic and social background factors, event characteristics, personality and mental health factors, and circumstantial details. Two of the categories analysed were persons who had suicided and persons who had been victims of foul play. The characteristics developed for a missing person who suicided were:

- male aged between 41 and 65 years
- married and/or has children
- last seen during the day and slightly more likely to suicide during summer
- out of character and no risk factors for foul play
- suicide suspected by the reporting person
- lack of rebellious behaviour and no previous history of going missing
- history of suicide attempts and depression
- short and long-term stressors.

The characteristics for a missing person who had been a victim of foul play were:

- female aged between 18 and 25 years
- single and without children
- involved in prostitution, or white collar employment
- last seen between 6.00pm and 11.59pm, on Saturday, during summer
- last seen in a public place
- out of character to be missing, lack of rebellion, and the first time the person has gone missing
- misadventure suspected by the reporting person
- no history of suicide attempts, and lack of mental health problems, short or long-term stressors, or drug and alcohol problems (Foy 2006).

## Key risk factors

The online questionnaire in this research identified mental health issues, alcohol and drug problems, family dysfunction and gambling as risk factors for adults. Both the police and search agencies were asked in the online questionnaire how common particular factors were in missing persons cases in which they had been involved. Table 4 lists the more prominent responses identified in the survey. It must be cautioned, however, that there were only nine respondents to this question (police=6; search agency=3), so the responses are not considered to be conclusive. Table 5 was developed by taking the responses from questions

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relating to risk factors and collapsing the categories of 'very common' and 'somewhat common' into 'more common' factors, and collapsing the categories 'not very common' and 'not at all common' into the 'less common' factors category. The 'don't know' category and those who did not answer were not included in the table.

Most of the responses reflect the risk factors found in the literature. For police, mental health (n=6), run away from home (n=6), financial problems (n=6) and history of suicidal behaviour/self-harm (n=6) were the more common factors, followed by domestic/family violence (n=5) and illicit drug and alcohol problems (n=5). There were too few responses to be able to generalise this finding. It may be useful to examine the perceptions of both police and search agencies of the risk factors for missing persons compared with data collected on all missing persons to see if these match. However, this would only be possible when uniform data are collected nationally.

Based on the literature review undertaken for this research, consultations with key stakeholders, the online questionnaire and the roundtable discussion, Table 5 outlines the potential risk factors associated with adult missing persons. Anecdotal evidence and small-scale studies suggest the following groups and factors as potential risk factors.

### *Mental health*

The impact of mental illness within the Australian population is becoming increasingly apparent. The 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that more than one million adults in the community had a mental disorder in the 12 months prior to the survey (ABS 1998). In 2004–05, there were an estimated 10 million mental health-related general practice consultations (Britt et al. 2005). In 2003–04, there were over 4.9 million mental health service contacts in public hospital outpatients clinics and community-based mental health services. This was the equivalent of 246.5 service contacts per 1,000 population (Britt et al. 2005). Females were more likely to experience affective and anxiety disorders, whereas males were more likely to experience substance abuse and psychotic disorders (ABS 1998).

Mental health appeared to be a substantial problem in every category of adult missing persons and was identified as a key issue in all aspects of this research. It is, however, difficult to get a definite picture because of data limitations. A consistent theme emerged from the questionnaires completed by families and friends of missing persons, the roundtable discussion and interviews with key stakeholders, as well as responses to the online questionnaire, which all identified mental health issues as significant risk factors for people going missing. Mental health also featured significantly in the police data. However this was more likely to reflect the number of people who had gone missing from mental health institutions and was considered the tip of the iceberg. For example, both the New

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Police (n=6)</b>		<b>Search agencies (n=3)</b>		<b>Total more common<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Total less common<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>Total responses<sup>b</sup></b>
	<b>More common</b>	<b>Less common</b>	<b>More common</b>	<b>Less common</b>			
Domestic/family violence	5	0	0	2	5	2	7
Child physical/sexual abuse	0	5	0	2	0	7	7
Alcohol problems	5	1	0	2	5	3	8
Drug problems	5	1	0	2	5	3	8
Mental health	6	0	0	2	6	2	8
Sexuality	0	6	0	2	0	8	8
Child abduction	0	6	1	1	1	7	8
Run away from home	6	0	1	1	7	1	8
Financial problems	6	0	0	2	6	2	8
CALD background	2	4	2	0	4	4	8
History of suicide ideation/self-harm	6	0	0	2	6	2	8
Possible victim of crime	1	5	1	1	2	6	8

a: Participants were responding to the question: 'When people go missing, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in your experience how common are the following factors?'; n=9

b: Discrepancies in totals are the result of some not answering a question, or answering 'don't know/not applicable'

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

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South Wales Police Force and South Australia Police recorded that more than one-quarter of missing persons for the period 2005–06 had mental health problems. Police data in South Australia showed that many of the people who had gone missing in the lost/wandered category were aged 65 years or more. Mental health problems among Indigenous missing persons and CALD missing persons were particularly highlighted in the consultations with key stakeholders.

A representative from Edgar Eager Lodge in Surry Hills, New South Wales, which is operated by the Wesley Mission as a homeless crisis centre for adults, indicated that a significant number of their clients had a mental illness and/or some type of addiction. They suspected that many of their clients were missing people, but could not confirm this as it was not part of their responsibility to know. They thought some of the reasons for these people going missing included that they had been shamed (more often people from CALD backgrounds) or they did not want anyone to know where they were, and some were escaping child support payments. It was estimated that 90 percent of the clients had a broken family background and that many problems could be traced to their childhood. Consultation with the Mental Health Association of New South Wales also revealed that people suffering mental health problems often had difficulty with some of the side effects of their medication and in some instances this could cause them to go missing.

Other research estimated that one-third of people who were reported missing were from an institution of some kind, most often a psychiatric facility. Mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression or severe emotional distress were identified as a common reason for going missing and were found to exist in half of all incidents surveyed (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

### *Alzheimer's disease and dementia*

It has been identified in previous research that age-specific causes such as Alzheimer's and dementia can be a reason for people going missing (Henderson & Henderson 1998). As the Australian population ages, the incidence of Alzheimer's disease and dementia will become more of an issue in some sections of the older population. In South Australia, the police data for the period 2005–06 showed that almost half of the people who had gone missing in the lost/wandered category were aged 65 years or over. Others have also identified dementia as a risk factor (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003).

### *Personal crisis due to circumstances such as financial problems, threat of violence or commission of an illegal act*

Very little research has been conducted in this area. It is possible that financial problems could lead to other forms of stress-related behaviour such as family violence, child abuse and suicide, and is therefore a major contributing factor. People in crisis may go missing in

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an attempt to resolve or escape from difficulties surrounding family problems, bereavement and financial problems (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003).

### *Drug and alcohol dependency*

Responses to the online questionnaire identified that illicit drug and alcohol problems were associated with reasons for people going missing. Another survey reported that 10 percent of missing persons had been identified as having drug and/or alcohol problems (Henderson & Henderson 1998).

It is difficult to separate illicit drug and alcohol addictions from mental health issues and many of the same circumstances apply. There is now significant evidence connecting mental illness to illicit drug use. For example, the evidence increasingly suggests that regular cannabis use, particularly by those who began using at a young age, increases the risk of mental illness. The evidence shows that:

- cannabis use precipitates schizophrenia in people who have a family history of that mental illness
- there is a two to three times greater incidence of psychotic symptoms among those who use cannabis
- there appears to be a link between early and regular cannabis use and later depression (Mental Health Council of Australia 2006).

**Table 5: Risk factors for adult missing persons**

<b>Decided</b>	<b>Drifted</b>	<b>Unintentional</b>	<b>Forced</b>
<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Missing by design</li><li>• Escape</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lost contact</li><li>• Transient lifestyle</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Alzheimer's disease</li><li>• Senile dementia</li><li>• Mental health problems</li><li>• Accident/misadventure</li><li>• Miscommunication</li></ul>	<b>Behaviour/situation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Homicide/foul play</li><li>• Separated by war</li></ul>
<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Males 20–24</li></ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All adults</li></ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• &gt;65 years</li><li>• All adults</li></ul>	<b>Age</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All adults</li></ul>
<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal crisis (marital/work problems)</li><li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li><li>• Gambling</li><li>• Financial problems</li><li>• Bereavement</li></ul>	<b>Social indicators</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Personal crisis (marital/work problems)</li><li>• Alcohol and illicit drug use</li><li>• Financial problems</li><li>• Unemployment</li></ul>		
<b>Other factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mental health</li><li>• Anxiety/depression</li><li>• Poor coping skills</li></ul>	<b>Other factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mental health</li><li>• Anxiety/depression</li><li>• Poor coping skills</li></ul>	<b>Other factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mental health</li><li>• Family violence</li></ul>	
<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family reconciliation</li><li>• Long-term missing</li><li>• Possible suicide</li></ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Family reconciliation</li><li>• Long-term missing</li><li>• Possible suicide</li></ul>	<b>Outcomes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Possible suicide</li></ul>	

## Hidden populations and under-reported reasons for people going missing

As mentioned previously, there are a number of people who go missing whose situation is never reported. There could be several reasons for this. One is that people from CALD backgrounds with mental health problems may feel that the associated stigma means that they just 'want to disappear'. Families and friends of Indigenous people who go missing often feel that they would rather not report the incident to the police and use their own networks to find them. Many homeless people could also be classified as missing persons who have never been reported missing to the police or other search agencies.



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When reporting people missing, it is very unlikely that the reporting person would indicate that family conflict or domestic violence had been present in the family and may be a reason for their family member to go missing. It is also unlikely that any abusive or neglectful behaviour towards a child would be admitted, or that the parents or carers of a child who has left home because of conflict over sexuality issues would report this to the police. In a similar manner, a child who has left home because of conflict with parents over sexuality may not be reported to police because of the stigma parents may feel. This could particularly be the case in rural and smaller communities.

The online survey requested the police and search agencies to identify any factors that people reporting missing persons may be reluctant to disclose to investigators. Included in these factors were domestic violence, abuse and other violence (n=4), infidelity (n=2), sexuality (n=2), and anything the person who reported the missing person has done to cause the disappearance (n=2) had more than one respondent listing reasons. Criminal activity (n=1), immigration (n=1) and cultural reasons (n=1) were other suggestions.

## **Culturally and linguistically diverse communities**

Consultation with a representative from the Multicultural Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing (Harmony Place) in Brisbane revealed that mental health problems and associated stigma from their own communities could be the catalyst for CALD people to go missing. They were often facing a double loading of stigma from both their own community and the broader Australian community. As a result, isolation became a huge issue for these people.

Research in the United Kingdom found that people from minority ethnic backgrounds were over-represented among outstanding missing persons in the overall missing persons population. However, as the length of time missing increased, the proportion of outstanding missing persons from minority ethnic backgrounds decreased, although the number of missing persons from ethnic backgrounds was still higher than those missing from the overall United Kingdom population (Newiss 2005).

## **Indigenous communities**

Consultation with the Community Harmony Project at Larrakia Nation Aboriginal Corporation in Darwin indicated that Indigenous people who went missing in the Northern Territory were often in their late 30s (and at least usually over 25) and were itinerants (homeless people) who had left their communities for one or several reasons. This included being expelled from their community because of antisocial behaviour or behaviour that was not acceptable to the other members of their community. Some may have left their community because they were not happy with the fact that it was a dry community.

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When people were reported missing to Larrakia Nation, they were traced by making inquiries to family members, Centrelink and their hometown community council, and by looking along their normal travel routes. By using this series of networks, those who went missing were usually found in a few weeks. They also tended not to worry too much about the older people as, more often than not, they had just gone to visit people in other communities. If someone had not been seen for more than a few weeks, a search was instigated using local knowledge and contacts, and the police were only involved in extreme circumstances.

Many of the Indigenous people who went missing for longer periods of time in the Northern Territory had a mental illness. While Larrakia Nation said that Indigenous missing persons were not usually reported to the police, statistics from the Northern Territory Police for 2005–06 showed that 194 Indigenous people had been reported missing.

It must be emphasised that this is the experience of one area in Australia and there could be many different processes and outcomes in other Indigenous urban, rural and remote communities (see, for example, research by Robertson & Demosthenous [2004] described earlier).

## **Intellectual disability**

There is little research that provides information about the level of risk for people with an intellectual disability to go missing. However, in this study the online questionnaire showed that intellectual disability was perceived by police as an important factor to consider when assessing the importance of assessing missing persons investigations (see Table 6).

## **Family violence**

Police statistics for New South Wales for the period 2005–06 showed that missing persons reports relating to domestic matters amounted to approximately three percent of all incidents. In Victoria, for the period 2005–06, seven percent of reports related to domestic matters. The effect of family violence is profound, particularly for the women who experience it and the children who witness it (Laing 2004; Tomison 2000). Women who are abused often suffer mental illness, alcohol and drug use, and eating disorders (Laing 2004).

## **Child abuse or neglect**

The online questionnaire revealed that when a person is reported missing, the reporting person is very unlikely to mention it is because of physical or sexual abuse. Child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and neglect has been recognised as a serious problem in Australian society. It is difficult to measure the incidence, however, as most cases are not

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reported. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect can be identified on four related levels. At an individual level, they can include a history of child abuse (parent), substance abuse (parent), and the psychological or physical illness of either the parent or the child. On a family level, marital conflict, domestic violence, poverty, stress and isolation are risk factors. At the community level, inadequate health care, unsafe neighbourhoods, inadequate community services, poverty and isolation have been identified. At the societal level, economic/social inequality and cultural acceptance of violence/gender inequality can all be risk factors. Some of the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect can also contribute to other types of problems such as juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, youth suicide, youth homelessness and mental health problems (Tomison 1997).

## Sexuality

The online questionnaire indicated that when families reported a person missing, they were unlikely to refer to the sexual orientation of the missing person. Consultations with Twenty10: Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service in Sydney highlighted a substantial problem with parental rejection of young people who had identified as being gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, same sex attraction or gender questioning, and who had subsequently left home without letting anyone know where they had gone. Many of these people came from CALD backgrounds and were less than 16 years old. Transgender issues appeared to be more profound and confronting for parents: around one-third of the housing provided by Twenty10 was occupied by transgender people. While attempts were made to reunite these young people with their families, it was very difficult and as a consequence they often experienced long-term homelessness and a very difficult life on the streets. Anecdotal evidence also suggested that some support services concerned with missing persons and their families are aware that the sexuality of the missing person can be a significant reason for young people going missing.

## Summary

In the United States, much of the early literature on missing persons concentrated on child abductions and kidnapping, and is therefore not particularly relevant to missing persons in Australia where these types of incidents are relatively rare. However, some research has provided valuable early insights into the social issues surrounding young people who go missing (Finkelhor, Hotaling & Sedlak 1990). Family conflict and child abuse have been found to have a profound impact on the reasons why some young people go missing (Dedel 2006). In the United Kingdom, more comprehensive detail has been documented on the different categories of missing young people, including those who go missing from

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care and those who go missing repeatedly from both their own homes and care (Biehal, Mitchell & Wade 2003; Biehal & Wade 2004; Hedges 2002).

In Australia, research by Swanton and colleagues (1988) and Henderson and Henderson (1998) has made a significant contribution to the literature concerning both young missing persons and adult missing persons. However, while reasons were given as to why people may go missing, neither project attempted to provide any form of missing person classification. Few other studies have concentrated on adult missing persons. The exceptions are research conducted by Biehal and colleagues (2003) and preliminary research on long-term missing persons (Newiss 2005).

While it was not possible to obtain sufficient data to determine risk factors for people going missing, using a triangulation of source material, including a review of other literature, responses to the online questionnaire and questionnaire for families, key informant consultations and the discussion at the roundtable, a number of consistent risk factors have been identified. While individual risk factors can have their own impact on why people go missing, the risk factors can also be cumulative. Risk factors identified in this research included mental health problems, financial problems, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence and family conflict, child abuse and neglect, and issues concerning sexuality. More specific research is required into the degree of risk of going missing for people with an intellectual disability. In line with the proposed continuum of missingness devised by Biehal, Mitchell & Wade (2003), these risk factors have been classified according to the categories 'decided', 'drifted', 'unintentional' and 'forced'. Further improvement in the identification of risk factors for people who go missing will rely on enhanced, nationally consistent data from the police and search agencies.

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## Searching for missing persons

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## Investigations

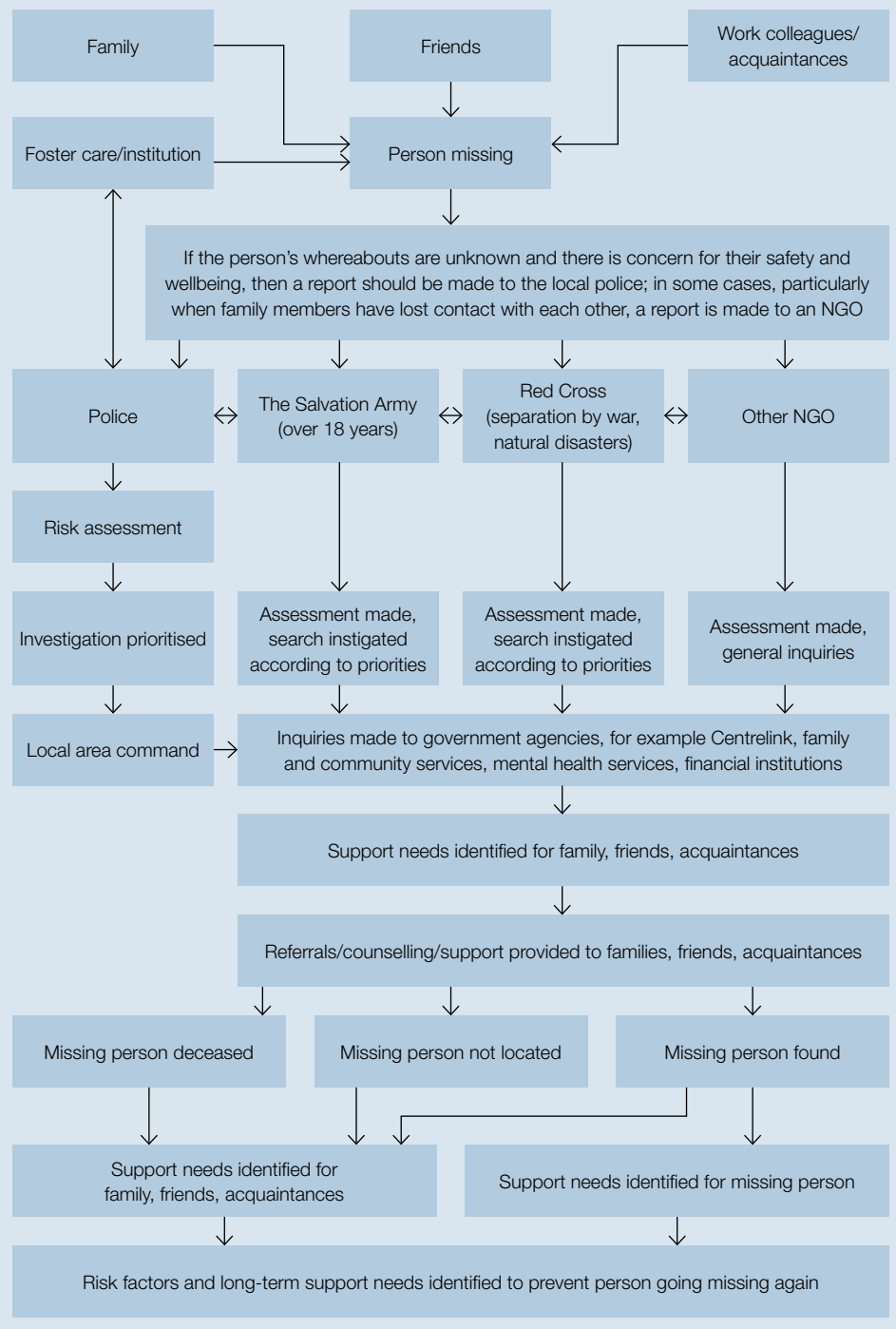
When a person goes missing, wherever or however it may occur, the impact on the people left behind can be profound and emotionally exhausting (FFMPU 2005). These people can be family members, friends, work colleagues or acquaintances. There is often a barrage of questions from friends, neighbours, police and in some cases the media. Feelings of desperation, confusion and isolation can ensue. There is no right or wrong way to respond to the disappearance of a family member or friend. What makes sense depends on individual needs, experiences and circumstances (OJJDP 2005).

Based on the research for this project, a framework was developed to show the main agencies involved in searching and the critical stages that occurred during the search or investigation process (see Figure 2). The framework begins at the critical time family, friends, work colleagues, foster carers or an institution realise that the person has gone missing. In the case of foster carers or an institution, the process is reasonably clear in that they have an immediate duty of care to report the missing person to the police. For family, friends and work colleagues, however, the process is often not so straightforward. The initial reaction is to make routine inquiries and check all usual haunts. If there is no success, the matter is usually lodged at the nearest police station or with another search service. The local police then try to locate the missing person by making their own inquiries of people and places familiar to the missing person. To maximise a positive outcome to the investigation or search, it is important that the report be made relatively quickly. In many cases, the reporting person has an instinctive feeling whether something is very wrong and their opinion of what may have happened is often a good indicator for the searching agencies (Foy 2006).

The police make a risk assessment according to their procedures, as part of the initial requirements of the missing persons report. Once the report is taken each case is risk assessed to determine the level of urgency and police response required. While the investigation is often coordinated by the appropriate jurisdictional MPU, the investigation itself is carried out by the local area command. Other search services make an assessment and instigate a search according to the resources available. Inquiries are made to government agencies, for example Centrelink, Medicare, community and family service departments, mental health services and in some cases to financial institutions. In the meantime, the families, friends and colleagues of the missing person are often presented with a very upsetting and worrying situation, and could require support and counselling services. Once these needs have been identified, referrals or counselling services are made available.

The needs of families are different at each stage of the investigation and should include recognition of the particular counselling needs for those with long-term missing family members or friends. If the person is found dead, this requires a particularly sensitive response. If the missing person is found alive, counselling is often required before he

**Figure 2: Framework for investigations/searches for missing persons**



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or she can reunite with family. In this process, any family difficulties identified should be addressed to reduce the likelihood of the person going missing again. If the family difficulties are too great, community and family services need to become involved. The two most likely agencies to respond to missing persons incidents when they occur within Australia are the police and The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service.

It should be noted that following on from the risk factors identified in the previous chapter, there is a substantial group of young missing persons who are not usually reported missing by their family or friends. They are usually state wards who have gone missing from foster care or juvenile care institutions. It is obligatory in all jurisdictions that their disappearance be reported immediately to the police, even when it is often known where they are but it is just not possible to arrange for their return. Duty of care is an important factor here. One respondent to the online questionnaire revealed that some of these young people abscond daily and can be a huge drain on police resources. In a similar manner, reports of people who go missing from mental health institutions can take up a disproportionate amount of police time. One police officer noted 'youth absconding from youth care facilities and persons absconding from psychiatric care facilities would account for a high proportion of our numbers. These two areas need to be addressed by the key stakeholders as it is obvious there are issues that need to be rectified'.

If a person goes missing while travelling overseas, DFAT may be notified and the appropriate international procedures put into place. This can be particularly distressing for family members because of the distances involved and unfamiliarity with customs and procedures in other countries (FFMPU 2005). As the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service helps to reunite people separated by war and conflict, the majority of their investigations are instigated by their sister organisations in other countries through the international tracing and message service (examples of searches are at Appendix 3).

## **Search agencies**

### *The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service*

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service is the main nongovernment tracing agency assisting with adult missing persons investigations within Australia. They are only able to search for adult members of the immediate family, for example, parents seeking adult children, adult children seeking parents, brothers and sisters seeking siblings, or grandparents, aunts and uncles seeking family members. The aim of the person searching must be for the purpose of reunification with their family. Resource issues mean that the service operates on a very limited budget and is not able to take on all cases reported to it. Some of the incidents reported to the police may be more appropriately investigated by The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service if workload and funding issues were resolved.



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Limited resources mean that The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service has to adopt a fairly narrow focus when agreeing to take on searches, although they are able to exercise some discretion in pursuing cases that fall just outside their guidelines (roundtable discussion). All searches conducted by The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service are coordinated by the relevant regional office and requests are accepted via a detailed application form. After reviewing the application, and if there are no legal issues involved, the search is commenced. If necessary, this involves a jurisdictional or international coordinated response. A timeframe for searching cannot be guaranteed, as searches can take a few days or years. A small fee is charged for the service, but can be waived depending on the socioeconomic status of the person requiring the service.

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service is more likely to deal with cases that involve families who have lost contact with each other. The service also provides counselling and support services for missing persons and their families and friends as part of their generic counselling services. The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service respects the wishes of the person found and it is entirely up to the person whether they have contact with the person searching. Letters may be forwarded between family members if they do not wish their whereabouts and contact details to be known. Examples of missing persons incidents investigated by the service are at Appendix 3.

### *Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation*

Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation was originally focused on reuniting members of the 'stolen generation', that is, Indigenous people who had been forcibly removed from their families from the 1950s until the 1970s under government policy. However, in New South Wales, for instance, Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation now provides support to children, youth and families in need or who have been removed from their natural families. Support and advocacy are also provided to Aboriginal foster carers. Examples of searches conducted by Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation are at Appendix 3.

## **Police**

Most police jurisdictions can expect to respond to at least one missing person report each day, with the larger jurisdictions experiencing a much higher volume. For example, on average, in New South Wales there are at least 25 reports each day (NSW MPU), in Queensland, South Australia and Victoria the number of reports is around 15 per day (Victoria Police Crime Statistics 2005–06; SA MPU; Qld MPU), in Western Australia eight per day (WA MPU), in the Australian Capital Territory around three per day (ACT MPU), and in the Northern Territory and Tasmania the number of missing persons reports is usually between one and two per day (NT MPU; Tas MPU). The challenge for police is to respond

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effectively to all reports and to identify those that require a more urgent and intensive response. The initial assessment by the officer in charge of the investigation is often critical to the outcome. It is also necessary to take into account what is achievable with the limited resources available. There are multiple types of missing persons scenarios that require different responses and there are different combinations of possible scenarios within those categories. Another issue for police assessment and resources is that only a small minority of all the people who go missing each year are victims of a serious crime. Conversely, one of the most significant factors to bear in mind regarding the police response to missing persons is that going missing is not a crime in itself.

Police in all jurisdictions accept reports as soon as there has been a concern for the safety and welfare of the missing person. All jurisdictions require that missing persons reports be filed in person, apart from South Australia, where reports can be taken over the telephone (cases involving young people who go missing from an institution can also be reported over the telephone in most instances). If the reporting person is unable to attend the local police station because of age, sickness, disability, distance, etc., local police attend their address to obtain more details. Reports are initially lodged at the area command at the police station nearest to the reporting person. This report is recorded on a database, in some instances onto the jurisdiction-wide database and in some instances onto the local police database. If the record is entered onto the local police database, details are forwarded to the relevant MPU, where details are then entered on the main database.

The MPUs are responsible for monitoring all missing persons reports and assisting the investigation. Depending on the perceived seriousness of the incident, the investigation is carried out either by local police or the state crime command. For instance, if the initial assessment identifies circumstances that are suspicious, out of character or showing evidence of the commission of a crime, the supervising officer of the major crime squad or equivalent is informed. If it is decided that the assistance of the media would be beneficial in helping to trace the missing person, permission is requested for a senior officer to release appropriate details. In these circumstances, consideration is given to the safety of the missing person and the likelihood that such publicity would help in locating them. Once a report is lodged with the police, they instigate inquiries immediately with relevant departments, for example, Centrelink, Medicare and financial institutions.

It must be emphasised that each police jurisdiction has its own policies and procedures in relation to missing persons investigations and the following are examples of the minimum standards only. The missing person investigation is usually approached in two stages:

- the preliminary investigation
- the follow-up investigation.

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The aim of the preliminary investigation into a missing person report is to assess the facts and circumstances of the report to determine the level of the police response. In the majority of cases the person will have returned of their own accord having suffered no significant harm. Occasionally a more serious crime such as homicide, rape or abduction has been committed, or the person may have suicided. If the missing person is not found within a few hours of the report and the police assessment indicates the need for a more intensive search, a follow-up investigation is recommended.

In most jurisdictions, the follow-up investigation includes once again contacting the agencies that may have some information on the person's whereabouts or details of any bank accounts that may have been accessed. As many family members, friends and acquaintances as possible, both within Australia and overseas, who may have some knowledge of the person's location, are contacted. The best most recent photograph is placed on file. If the investigation is ongoing, the officer in charge of the MPU is updated on the status of the investigation every seven days during the first month and after that on a monthly basis. Ideally police communicate on a regular basis with the reporting person in the first week and then when significant information is received. If the missing person is not found after a period of time, the following procedures can be undertaken by the police:

- identify the missing person's dentist and medical practitioner and obtain any relevant evidence (for example x-rays and dental charts)
- obtain a DNA sample from a close relative for the database (DNA can also be obtained early in the investigation if this is necessary, and is decided on a case-by-case basis)
- a specific form to be forwarded to the MPU
- distribute a missing person poster to all police stations for public display.

If the missing person is not located within six months, the investigation file is usually forwarded to the officer in charge of the relevant MPU. Ongoing annual reports are then usually filed. Generally contact is maintained with the family, next of kin or inquirer throughout the investigation. This contact is on a weekly basis for the first two months with the ongoing frequency determined on an individual case basis in consultation with the people concerned.

An examination of the forensic medical issues raised by the delayed identification of those classified as missing highlighted the importance of including dental data in the investigation of missing persons (Blau et al. 2006). Of particular significance was the fact that each of the eight Australian states and territories has its own MPU that operates within distinct state and territory legislation, resulting in a lack of uniformity regarding legal procedures. It was suggested that one of the main investigative problems in missing persons cases is the lack of forensic medical, particularly odontological, procedures. Forensic odontology has been employed in numerous cases in Australia where identity was unknown or uncertain because of remains being skeletonised, incinerated or partly burnt (Blau et al. 2006).

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One respondent to the online questionnaire suggested that ‘a national database of all unidentified bodies including dental and medical information be created as there could be unidentified bodies in each jurisdiction who could be people who have been reported missing in other states, but as each state and territory have individual records, these cannot be matched up’. Several jurisdictions are now addressing this issue. CrimTrac is also addressing some of these issues with the formulation of a national database that includes categories of missing persons.

## **Risk assessment**

The formulation of risk assessment procedures has presented considerable difficulties for many police jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas. Risk assessment procedures that facilitate priority ratings for each case are of paramount importance and are the means of providing a standardised method of determining the degree of risk to which people could be more or less exposed. Risk assessment is one element of a more general move towards utilising data and scientifically valid methods for analysing and interpreting data (Maguire 2000; Tilley 2002). This has been particularly evident in the development of intelligence-led policing that specifically identifies crime problems or risks so that effective and appropriate preventative strategies may be formulated (Maguire 2000; Tilley 2002). Risk assessment should contain information specific to the circumstances of going missing as well as information about the normal lives of people who have gone missing that may be a contributory factor to their behaviour (Hedges 2002).

It could be argued that the investigation of many missing persons cases consumes a large amount of police time. However, the chance that any one person could come to harm means that care must be taken over the initial report and ensuing investigation to evaluate the seriousness of the report. This ‘cry wolf’ situation makes it hard to sustain the required level of commitment, especially when dealing with similar circumstances on a daily basis. It is all too easy to miss those who may be at real risk of harm (Hedges 2002).

Participants in the missing persons survey were asked to assess factors they used from most to least important when assessing missing persons cases. These were conducted on a Likert scale including the options of ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘sometimes important’, ‘not very important’ and ‘don’t know/not applicable’. Due to the small number of responses, the categories of ‘very important’ and ‘important’ were collapsed into an ‘important’ category; and the ‘sometimes important’ and ‘not very important’ categories were collapsed into the ‘less important’ category. Table 6 shows a selection of responses to the questionnaire. Overall, the more important factors were length of time missing (n=25), mental illness (n=24), history of harm/suicide ideation (n=24), and intellectual disability (n=23). The less important factors were the sex of a missing person (n=17) and financial problems (n=13). These findings concur with the roundtable findings and the consultation with key stakeholders. It is important to note, however, that there was little difference between each response.

**Table 6: Perceived importance of factors in assessing a missing person case<sup>a</sup>**

Factors	Police (n=6)		Search agencies (n=3)		Other agencies (n=19)		Total important	Total less important	Total responses <sup>b</sup>
	Important	Less important	Important	Less important	Important	Less important			
Age – child	6	0	1	2	13	0	20	2	22
Age – teenage	5	1	1	2	13	1	19	4	23
Age – over 55	1	5	1	2	15	0	17	7	24
Sex	2	4	1	2	7	11	10	17	27
History of going missing	6	0	0	2	13	4	19	6	25
Length of time missing	6	0	3	0	16	2	25	2	27
Alzheimer's/dementia	6	0	1	2	15	0	22	2	24
Intellectual disability	6	0	1	2	16	1	23	3	26
Mental illness	6	0	1	2	17	1	24	3	27
Alcohol/drug problems	6	0	1	2	12	6	19	8	27
Financial problems	6	0	0	3	8	10	14	13	27
Possibility of misadventure/accident	6	0	1	2	15	2	22	4	26
History of self-harm/suicide ideation	6	0	1	2	17	0	24	2	26

a: Participants were asked to assess factors they used from most to least important when assessing missing persons cases; n=28

b: Discrepancies in totals are the result of some not answering a question, or answering 'don't know/not applicable'

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

Table 6 gives an indication of the factors important to police when assessing missing persons cases. Most of the categories showed that all six police respondents indicated that mental health, previous history of going missing, and Alzheimer's disease/dementia were important factors to be considered for reasons people go missing. When assessing a missing person case, the younger age group, including both children and teenagers, were considered to be most important by all six police respondents.

Police and search agencies were asked how they found out about the above factors. Table 7 shows the combined responses. Finding out about the risk factors frequently involved contact with friends (n=5), colleagues (n=5) or relatives (n=7), and previous missing persons records (n=6). Most of the options were used either frequently or sometimes, however banks and financial institutions were less likely to be used for this information, with only one respondent frequently finding out from this source, and two only sometimes. This is to be expected as factors such as suicide ideation and self-harm, possibility of a misadventure or accident, previous history of going missing and mental illness are not likely to be information that banks and financial institutions would know about. The online questionnaire also indicated that the majority of the reports the police received for missing persons were from families and friends. None of the reports was from banks or government departments such as Centrelink and Medicare. It also revealed that domestic violence and other marriage problems were not likely to be mentioned as a reason for a person going missing by the reporting person.

<b>Table 7: Perceptions of key sources of information used by police and search agencies<sup>a</sup></b>						
	<b>Fre- quently</b>	<b>Some- times</b>	<b>Not often</b>	<b>Never</b>	<b>Don't know/ unsure</b>	<b>Not answered</b>
Friends	5	3	0	0	0	1
Colleagues	5	3	0	0	1	0
Relatives	7	2	0	0	0	0
Health services	2	4	1	1	0	1
Banks/financial institutions	1	2	2	3	0	1
Missing persons records	6	0	1	1	0	1
Criminal history check <sup>b</sup>	4	2	0	0	0	0

a: Participants were asked about the sources of their key information when assessing missing persons cases; n=9

b: Option was not available for search agencies

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

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Overseas police practice in risk assessment procedures underpins many of the risk assessment procedures adopted by MPUs in Australian police jurisdictions. In particular, risk assessment procedures in the United Kingdom have influenced police practice in Australia and it is for this reason that the historical development of these procedures is outlined in some detail below. The risk assessment categories used by the FBI that have also influenced procedures in some Australian jurisdictions are noted below.

### *United Kingdom*

In recent years, much of the research on missing persons in the United Kingdom has been commissioned by the police and has focused almost exclusively on risk assessment and subsequent police practice. In 1995, the Review of Police Core and Ancillary Tasks confirmed the responsibility of the police to respond to reports of missing persons (Home Office 1995). At the same time, the police began to express increasing unease about the difficulty of responding effectively to the increasing number of reports of missing persons, and in particular, the difficulty in identifying those missing persons who may have, or who were likely to, come to harm. Following this review, in 1997 the Home Office, in consultation with the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), instigated a program of work to examine the manner in which the police responded to 'suspicious' missing persons cases, among other issues. The police in the United Kingdom tend not to look for people except in cases of vulnerability or crime, and regularly refer cases to Missing People (Missing People [National Missing Persons Helpline] n.d.d).

One of the first risk assessment studies was undertaken in the United Kingdom in 1998 (Newiss 1999). A checklist was subsequently designed by the Home Office to identify when a missing person may be vulnerable and this was crucial to risk assessment procedures. The following criteria were used, either as standalone risk factors or as cumulative risk factors in determining the seriousness of the missing person investigation:

- under 18 years of age
- over 18 who suffered from epilepsy
- people with diabetes or amnesia
- people with suicidal tendencies
- aged 65 years and more
- people with mental health problems
- where it was suspected that harm had occurred.

A subsequent report argued that a form of risk assessment was needed that allowed the person taking the report to make an evaluation of the risk to which the individual was exposed (Hedges 2002). Furthermore, it was stressed that the assessment standards

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needed to be uniform, enabling everyone to immediately understand the significance of each report particularly when dealing with cases that crossed police boundaries. Apart from assessing the risk to which a person was exposed, an assessment would indicate which priority grading response the police should give to an inquiry. Not only would this ensure that those at risk would be investigated quickly and thoroughly, but it would also reduce the chances of excessive resources and efforts being committed to an inquiry that did not warrant it. When commencing an investigation, Hedges (2002) suggested that there were three elements that needed to be considered to determine the degree of harm the person was likely to experience. These were:

- those relating to the missing person
- the circumstances surrounding the person reporting the disappearance
- factors relating to any third party.

The report recommended strategies for the police management of missing persons investigations in the United Kingdom (Hedges 2002). These included a need for a more standardised approach to missing persons nationally in terms of the following:

- a national reporting form
- compatible information technology across police jurisdictions
- greater reporting to the Police National Missing Persons Bureau
- standardisation of risk assessments across jurisdictions.

It was also suggested that police should ensure that correct procedures are in place in relation to:

- ownership of missing persons investigations
- a structured management and review process
- gathering of intelligence from missing persons reports and interviews
- proper management and recording of search activities
- support to families of those who have gone missing.

A national missing persons reporting form was developed. It was adopted by all police forces with the exception of those with existing information technology systems that did not comply with the national data standards. Minimum information to be gathered when taking the initial report included:

- name
- age
- description of person
- description of clothing



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- home address
  - location from where the person went missing
  - circumstances of going missing
  - whether behaviour is out of character
  - details of any vehicle or other transport used
  - assessment of the person reporting
  - name, address and telephone number of person reporting.

The ACPO first published their *Manual of guidance for the management of missing persons* in 2002. This stated that the police response to any person reported missing should be guided by the outcome of an assessment of the risk involved. The ACPO guide provided no clear statement of how the police should respond to the continued disappearance of a missing person. A list of factors to be considered included personal circumstances such as:

- the age of the missing person
- their ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment
- any physical or mental health problems they may have
- the circumstances of the disappearance, including suspicion of murder, suicide or a range of factors that may result in harmful outcomes to the individual concerned (ACPO 2002).

The level of risk had important ramifications for the extent of police activity in response to the missing person report. There were three levels of risk identified:

- low risk – other than being recorded on the police national computer, cases require ‘no proactive involvement by police to trace the missing person’
- medium risk – cases require an ‘active response by police and other agencies ... to trace the missing person’
- high risk – cases require ‘the immediate deployment of police resources’ including the involvement of senior officers in a press and media strategy (ACPO 2002: 13).

In 2005, the ACPO revised its guide and stipulated that the use of the risk identification factors would assist the police in making an appropriate assessment. If the answer to any of the questions was yes, then the risk may be high and the advice of a supervisor should be sought. The criteria now include:

- Was there any information that the person is likely to cause self-harm or attempt suicide?
- Was the person suspected to be victim of a crime in progress, for example, abduction?
- Was the person vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other factor?

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- Were there inclement weather conditions that would seriously increase risk to health, particularly where the missing person is a child or elderly?
  - Did the missing person need essential medication or treatment not readily available to them?
  - Did the missing person have any physical illness, disability or mental health problems?
  - Was it believed that the person may not have the ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment?
  - Had the person been involved in a violent, homophobic and/or racist incident or confrontation immediately prior to disappearance?
  - Had the person been subject to bullying?
  - Had the person previously disappeared and suffered, or was exposed to, harm?
  - Was the behaviour out of character and likely to be an indicator of their being exposed to harm?

The existing levels of risk assessment were also expanded:

- low risk – in addition to recording the information on the police national computer, the police will advise the person reporting the disappearance that following basic inquiries and unless circumstances change, further active inquiries will not be carried out by police; details will be passed to Missing People in line with the national protocol; low-risk missing persons, however, must be kept under review as risk can increase with the passage of time
- medium risk – requires an active and measured response by police and other agencies in order to trace the missing person and support the person reporting
- high risk – requires the immediate deployment of police resources and a member of the British Crime Unit senior management team or similar command level must be involved in the examination of initial inquiry lines and approval of appropriate staffing levels; appointment of a senior investigating officer; press/media strategy and/or close contact with outside agencies (ACPO 2005).

In an analysis of over 1,000 cases selected at random from five London boroughs chosen to be representative of the Metropolitan Police in terms of geographical location and the types of incidents occurring, police were able to obtain estimates of the number of missing persons investigations in each category:

- ‘minimal or routine’ (72%) – included a small number of phone calls, a visit to the informant and one or two other visits to friends, relatives or ‘known haunts’
- ‘a little additional effort’ (26%) – with more extensive contacts and inquiries, such as employers, former flat-mates and schoolteachers. If the person had been missing for some time it would also include several follow-up or repeat visits

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- ‘considerable additional effort’ (2%) – involved contacts with embassies, Interpol and foreign police forces, more intensive searches involving several officers or other forces, the use of helicopters, searching closed circuit television evidence or issuing a press release or a television appeal (Tarling & Burrows 2004).

## YOUNG PEOPLE

Research on missing children has noted the importance of including the following criteria for risk assessment:

- young people may be as much at risk on the first occasion they go missing as after multiple absences
- equally, young people who run away repeatedly are just as vulnerable as others – although they are often viewed more as ‘problems’ than as ‘at risk’ – and sufficient consideration should be given as to why they are persistently absenting themselves
- young people who go missing are at risk of violence and victimisation, including sexual assault, especially if they ‘sleep rough’
- young people who go missing are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, including involvement in prostitution
- young people who run away are at risk of involvement in offending, and this is especially true for those who go missing often from placements in residential care (Biehal & Wade 2004).

In assessing the significance of a child’s absence, Hedges (2002) identified the following risk factors:

- age of the child
- legal status of the child
- previous behaviour and history
- state of mind of the child/perceived risk
- group behaviour
- whether the child is perceived as running to/from someone/something
- risk of offending
- risk of the child being targeted by organised groups, for example, abduction by paedophiles or for prostitution.

## *United States*

The FBI has developed a guide to assist law enforcement with the entry of missing persons records into the National Crime Information Center Missing Person File (FBI n.d.). The instructions and reports provided in the guide are intended to assist law enforcement

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agencies with the collection of information to create an accurate profile of the missing person. Categories of missing persons used by the FBI are:

- disability – a person of any age who is missing and under proven physical/mental disability or is senile, thereby subjecting himself/herself or others to personal and immediate danger
- endangered – a person of any age who is missing under any circumstances indicating that he or she may be in physical danger; if this is a child abduction or AMBER Alert (see page 68 for description) it needs to be indicated
- involuntary – a person of any age who is missing under circumstances indicating that the disappearance may not have been voluntary (for example, abduction or kidnapping); if this is a child abduction or AMBER Alert it needs to be indicated
- juvenile – a person under the age of 21 who is missing and does not meet any of the above criteria
- catastrophe – a person of any age who is missing after a catastrophe
- other – a person aged 21 years or older who does not meet the criteria for entry in any other category who is missing and for whom there is a reasonable concern for his or her safety.

## YOUNG PEOPLE

In the United States, police encounter young people who go missing, whether reported or not, through a number of activities: while patrolling areas where young missing persons congregate, while investigating missing persons reports, or during criminal investigations in which young people are offenders or victims. In 1999, less than 10 percent of young people who went missing were arrested for running away (Snyder 2001). When arrested, they were usually charged with prostitution, curfew violations, truancy, and drug and alcohol offences. Police have some discretion in handling cases involving young people who go missing depending on whether they were reported missing, the level of parental or caretaker concern, and the seriousness of the risks the young people are believed to face (Snyder 2001). Despite their interest in protecting children's safety, it has been argued that in the United States police may assign a low priority to young people who have gone missing for a number of reasons:

- few jurisdictions have appropriate facilities for placement once young missing persons are taken into police custody
- processing paperwork and transporting young people consume significant amounts of time
- most police have competing demands from more immediate public safety threats
- some police believe parents and substitute care providers want police to act as disciplinarians or security guards

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- young missing persons cases can be frustrating when young people do not want to return or parents do not want them to return
  - young people often run away again shortly after police return them home (Dedel 2006).

As a result, one of the most crucial elements of risk assessment in police practice is to be able to distinguish between incidents involving young people who run away (usually associated with adolescents) and those incidents that involve someone who has disappeared involuntarily (Simons & Willie 2000). Police agencies need to decide quickly how to respond to cases with clear indicators about what happened, such as dealing with a witnessed stranger abduction, a young missing person who packs a bag and leaves a note, or a very young missing child. Police generally investigate these cases whatever the circumstances (Simons & Willie 2000).

Between the extremes, however, decision making often proves difficult (Simons & Willie 2000). A survey of law enforcement agencies in the United States identified that their highest challenge in rating a missing person case involving young people was the difficulty in knowing whether the child had disappeared voluntarily (Simons & Willie 2000). To assess a missing child report accurately, it has been emphasised that responding officers need to explore the missing child's lifestyle and behaviours, and look at family circumstances as well as the attitudes and behaviours of parents. Officers must have the motivation and availability of resources necessary to take the extra time needed for an evaluation of the incident and to form an assessment as to whether a voluntary departure proves consistent with the child's behaviour patterns (Simons & Willie 2000).

The challenge of abduction versus cases where young people go missing voluntarily resulted in the identification of a number of areas that should be included in the assessment of young people who have gone missing (Simons & Willie 2000). The assessment was equally valid for young people and adults, and is outlined as follows:

- know what the person was doing prior to going missing
- determine the person's hobbies or interests
- identify normal activity patterns including any fears or phobias
- determine if there have been any stressful events in the person's life and how they normally deal with stress
- gather information from school friends, teachers, work colleagues and any other significant people in separate interviews
- know what drug or alcohol issues the person may have, including if there are any medical conditions
- if the missing person is female and post-pubescent, identify any pregnancy issues
- review any written material belonging to the missing person, especially diaries, artwork and schoolwork

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- find out if the missing person has previously gone missing, and if so whether they stated their intention to do so
  - determine if there was a note left on previous occasions, where the missing person went during previous disappearing episodes, and for how long they were gone. Also identify if there had been any previous suicide attempt or self-inflicted injury.

It was thought that by gaining insight into the above areas, it would be possible to determine if the person had the motivation to run away, and if they had the capability to leave, for example, the financial means. However, to help differentiate young people who run away from others who may have come to serious harm, the following risk assessment procedures for missing child cases were advocated:

- parental interview – separation of parents, family members and reporting parties during the interviews
- victimology – examination of the missing child's family dynamics, comfort zones, and school and peer associates
- scene assessment – assessment of the child's residence for evidence, or lack of, pre-departure preparation
- resources – evaluation of resources available to the child that would enable or inhibit a voluntary departure
- time factors – consideration of the amount of time passed since the child was last seen (Simons & Willie 2000).

To assess whether the young person who runs away can sustain a voluntary long-term absence, the following issues were highlighted for investigation:

- Money – does the child have access to money or credit cards? Officers should verify if the child recently accessed bank accounts through ATM withdrawals or other means. Is money missing from parents or siblings? Officers also should determine if the child possesses adequate skills to obtain employment and, therefore, additional money.
- Transportation – does the missing child have access to a vehicle, and if so, is that vehicle present or absent? Officers should determine if the child is familiar with public transport such as bus or train system, and conduct appropriate follow-up contacts with local providers. Friends or family members unwittingly may have helped the child run away by providing some form of transportation.
- Clothing/toiletries – does the evidence suggest that the child has packed any clothing or toiletries? Remembering the possibility that a crime scene may exist within the child's residence, officers should attempt to verify what items, if any, are no longer present in the child's room. Missing clothes, toiletries, make-up, medications or other items of personal significance often may indicate pre-departure preparations (Simons & Willie 2000).

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A more recent guide for the risk assessment of young people included the following criteria:

- Aged 13 and younger – children aged 13 and younger have less sophisticated decision-making skills and cannot protect themselves from exploitation and older young people.
- Out of safety zone for age, physical or mental condition – this will vary depending on their characteristics. Young people with cognitive impairments may have difficulty communicating their needs and providing information required to access help. They are particularly at risk of exploitation.
- Alcohol or drug dependent – substance use impairs judgement and the ability to protect oneself from harm.
- At risk of foul play or sexual exploitation – the risk level will depend on the types of illegal activity occurring in the community, where the young people are believed to be staying, and the young people's past experiences and maturity levels.
- Believed to be in a life-threatening situation – this assessment will vary depending on the places the young people frequent and their experiences during past runaway episodes.
- Absent more than 24 hours before reported to police – a delay in reporting may indicate parental neglect, but could simply be a misunderstanding of the law. Many parents believe missing persons reports require a waiting period.
- In the company of dangerous companions – some young people stay with older adults who may exploit their vulnerability; others associate with peers who use drugs or are involved in criminal activity.
- Inconsistent with normal behaviour patterns – an out-of-character departure may signal acute distress or the possibility of foul play (Dedel 2006).

## *Australia*

In the late 1980s, according to Swanton and Wilson (1989), police officers throughout Australia applied formal and informal risk criteria in assessing responses to missing persons reports. For this current study, police who responded to the online questionnaire indicated there are three critical factors that determine police assessment of missing persons cases: age (either young child or over 55), health (including physical and mental), and suspicion of foul play. Other factors influencing the level of the police investigation are the possibility of an accident or misadventure, a history of self-harm or suicide attempt, and a history of going missing. A police response to the online questionnaire on determining which critical factors apply, stated:

... our role is to identify suspicious circumstances, therefore the relationship of the reporting person is important together with any known history of disagreements. The financial situation of the missing person is important

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as well as the time between when the person went missing and when they were reported missing. Any discrepancies in the reporting person's story need to be identified. Immigration issues such as non-compliance with study visas are also checked.

Each police jurisdiction in Australia has developed its own missing person criteria and risk assessment procedures. It must also be emphasised that individual police officers are encouraged to make their own assessment of the situation. The following categories are often used:

- involuntary missing:
  - suspected crime
  - parental abduction
  - suspicious and unusual circumstances
- lost/wandered:
  - infant or young child who is wholly or substantially reliant on a parent or guardian for support or survival
  - person suffering from a psychological or mental incapacity who is wholly or substantially reliant on others for support or survival
  - missing from a mental health institution and poses a danger to him or herself or others
- voluntary missing:
  - runaway child under 16 years
  - runaway child 16–18 years
  - person missing for undetermined motives or reasons, not suspicious
  - suspected suicide
- missing due to event (natural disaster, lost at sea)
- unidentified human remains.

In some jurisdictions, a risk identification checklist can include these questions:

- Is the person vulnerable due to age, infirmity or any other similar factor?
- Is the missing person a child on the child protection register?
- Behaviour that is out of character is often a strong indicator of risk – are the circumstances of going missing different from normal behaviour patterns?
- Is the person suspected to be the subject of a significant crime in progress, for example, abduction?
- Is there any indication that the person is likely to commit suicide?



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- Is there any reason for the person to go missing?
  - Are there family or relationship problems or a recent history of family conflict and/or abuse?
  - Are they the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence?
  - Does the missing person have any physical or mental health problems?
  - Has the person previously disappeared and suffered/been exposed to harm?
  - Does the person have the ability to interact safely with others or in an unknown environment?
  - Do they need essential medication that is not likely to be available to them?
  - Is ongoing bullying or harassment a concern, for example, racial, sexual, homophobic or local community or cultural issues?
  - Is the person dependent on drugs or alcohol?
  - Does the person have school/college/university/employment or financial problems?
  - Is the behaviour out of character?
  - Is the information provided by the person reporting the incident valid?
  - Are there other unlisted factors that police consider should influence risk assessment?

The following measures of impact to determine the priority the investigation should receive are also sometimes used:

- low risk – no apparent threat or danger to either missing person or the public; requires management by routine procedures, minimal input from MPU
- medium risk – missing person or public possibly facing some danger; requires MPU attention, also requires supervisory attention
- high risk – risk posed is immediate and there are substantial grounds for believing that the missing person or public is in danger; requires immediate MPU attention, also requires management attention.

It was identified at the roundtable discussion that as well as risk assessment procedures, it would be beneficial for frontline police to have investigation guidelines to help with their responses to missing persons cases. Victoria Police are currently working on guidelines for this purpose. At present no Australian police service has any formal assessment criteria or guidelines specifically for missing young people.

Newiss (1999) observed in his study that the individual skills, training and supervision of police officers taking missing persons reports were crucial to their judgement of effective prioritisation of reports. One of the issues identified was in relation to the standard of information recorded in the investigations. A recommendation for improvement was a review of training, not only to provide greater skills, but also to heighten awareness of the

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importance of missing persons investigations. Adequate training, more effective supervision by line managers, clarity in roles and responsibilities, and a greater focus on family liaison and support would also be beneficial (Hedges 2002).

The NMPCC has recently recruited an education and training officer to develop and implement a strategically targeted education and training program. In consultation with police jurisdictions, this program may include the identification of training needs of police officers relating to missing persons investigations and the development of relevant resources. The NMPCC is also in the preliminary stages of formulating national guidelines for the risk assessment of missing persons reports.

It should be noted that while risk assessment categories are helpful, further detailed analysis is needed to more succinctly identify correct procedures for prioritising missing persons cases. From a study of missing persons who had been victims of homicide, it was concluded that a broad-brush approach to risk assessment was likely to overlook certain sub-groups of the missing persons population who are vulnerable to specific risks (Newiss 2004). The study identified that there was a relatively high risk faced by adult females of being the victim of homicide, a point that was confirmed by Foy (2006). While adolescent missing persons had a substantially lower risk of becoming a homicide inquiry, the police should not discount various other adverse outcomes of going missing, for example sexual exploitation or violence. Newiss (2004) also recommended that an analysis of missing persons who had committed suicide, been victims of accidents or victims of the natural elements would be a significant step forward. In addition, research to examine the risk of missing persons suffering non-fatal, but still adverse, consequences such as sexual exploitation and violence was necessary. Together these studies would provide much needed empirical support of the day-to-day decision making of police officers deciding on the police response to a given missing person case (Newiss 2004).

## Coordinating with other agencies

Law enforcement responses alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving missing persons investigations. Shared responsibilities with appropriate organisations can improve the response. Effective coordination with other government and nongovernment agencies is therefore an important factor in police missing persons investigations. In 2002, Australian law enforcement agencies endorsed a national and coordinated approach to missing persons, based on four key principles: prevention, location, education and support (PLEaS) (<http://www.afp.gov.au/national/missing>). This outlines the principles needed for effective inter-agency cooperation. These principles were developed in consultation with the two NMPCC national committees – the National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons, and the Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons – and are:

- **Prevention** reduces the incidence of missing persons and therefore the emotional and financial costs, promoting and enhancing a safer society for all Australians.

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- **Location** recognises the critical need to find the missing persons as quickly as possible through a coordinated, national approach to reduce the impact on families and friends and the missing persons themselves.
  - **Education** increases awareness in relation to missing persons to minimise the incidence, enhance the response and encourage a whole-of-government approach in cooperation with the community.
  - **Support** minimises the trauma suffered by the missing persons, family and friends, and the impact on the community.

In Australia, inter-agency cooperation would be particularly useful when investigating missing persons cases involving young people who have gone missing while in care. Appropriate protocols and guidelines among the police, child protection agencies and government departments would encourage more useful procedures to prevent these children going missing in the first place and also ease the pressure on police.

In Australia, models of police cooperation with other agencies are already in existence, for example, the family violence and domestic violence intervention models described in Chapter 5. One example of these is the FVIP in the Australian Capital Territory. The key role of the FVIP is to coordinate an effective response by the criminal justice system on both a macro level (policy, administrative, technological infrastructure and legislation) and a micro level (case management, individual practitioner decision making and monitoring of the decision). The FVIP involves a Memorandum of Agreement with 10 core participating agencies (Holder & Caruana 2006).

In the United States, a variety of agency-level responses to coordinate the search for missing young people has been suggested (Dedel 2006). These are as follows:

- Appoint a local runaway coordinator – as there is an overlap between the police and other social service providers in their responsibility for young people who go missing, it could be useful to appoint a liaison officer to coordinate services, convene inter-agency meetings, manage service delivery and monitor outcomes. They could also be responsible for implementing inter-agency protocols and guidelines for practice.
- Collaborate with social service agencies – although the police may locate and safely return young people who have run away, collaborating with other agencies can minimise the amount of police time required and ensure that the young people receive appropriate services. A framework needs to be developed for each agency's response to reported episodes of young missing persons, along with procedures for assisting young people who run away and are identified through other means. Involving social service agencies in returning young people to their homes or to care can also help deal with abusive domestic situations.

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Agreements need to be formalised into memoranda of understanding between police and social service agencies. Formalising agreements ensures their sustainability, making sure that they are not dependent on the individuals who created them but are agency specific.

- Develop joint protocols with foster care providers and group homes – agencies providing substitute care for young people often report them as missing within a short space of time if they have not returned by a specified time. The level of risk for young people needs to be assessed before declaring an emergency. To avoid overwhelming police resources, protocols specifying when to contact police should be developed. The protocols should categorise the various types of absences for each situation.
- Joint training of staff from multiple agencies – coordinated interaction between the police and social service providers is needed. Inter-agency training sessions are important to promote an understanding of the complexity of the issue and the need for partnerships.

Box 1 gives an example of a joint investigation response into child abuse and neglect by the New South Wales Police Force and the Department of Community Services. A collaborative response to missing persons investigations could be based on this model.

***Box 1: Joint investigation response team into child abuse and neglect (New South Wales)***

The purpose of a joint investigation into allegations of child abuse by police and the Department of Community Services is to provide a coordinated response for effective criminal investigation that ensures the safety and welfare needs of the child are met. It also facilitates better information sharing between the two main agencies and is intended to reduce the number of times children have to be interviewed about the allegations (Cashmore 2002). The aims of joint investigation are to:

- ensure the safety and protection of children
- provide a timely and appropriate response
- improve the effectiveness of the investigation and prosecution processes
- reduce the stress on children and their non-abusive carers arising from the investigation and prosecution process
- ensure immediate referral to crisis counselling
- address the individual needs of children, young people and families
- use protective intervention to ensure the safety of children and young people.

In the United Kingdom, the ACPO (2005) guidance included the following suggestions for coordination among agencies:

- an effective multi-agency approach, with all partners undertaking their respective duty of care
- named persons within organisations working together to address problems, including taking positive action to deal with repeat missing persons from homes and locations with a high incidence of cases
- management of the return of missing persons, gathering intelligence about their activities and associates, with appropriate intervention (this is proven to reduce the incidence of missing and offending behaviour).

Table 8 outlines the training required to deal with missing persons cases identified in the online questionnaire by the police, search agencies and other agencies such as counselling, health and support services.

**Table 8: Perceptions of training requirements<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Training required</b>	<b>Police (n=6)</b>	<b>Search agencies (n=3)</b>	<b>Other agencies (n=19)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Counselling	2	2	0	4
Missing persons case management issues	3	2	3	8
Knowledge and identification of missing persons and at-risk individuals	1	1	9	11

a: The question asked of police and search agencies was: 'What training do you think you require when dealing with those affected by missing persons?' For other agencies, if the respondent felt they required training to help people at risk of going missing, they were asked to list what type of training would be beneficial; n=28, however not everyone responded and respondents were able to list more than one requirement

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

The question allowed a free response, and the responses were categorised under the three broad areas of counselling, missing persons case management issues, and the knowledge and identification of missing persons and at-risk individuals. Respondents could suggest more than one area of training requirement. For police, missing persons case management issues (n=3) and learning more about counselling (n=2) were perceived to be areas that training may be beneficial, with one respondent also wanting knowledge on missing persons and at-risk individuals. The three search agencies had similar priorities, with counselling (n=2), and case management (n=2) being suggested, and one response for knowledge on missing persons. For the other agencies that were surveyed, almost all responses to this question were concerning the general knowledge and identification of missing persons and at-risk individuals (n=9), with the other suggestions focusing on managing missing persons cases (n=3). Although these are small numbers, it could indicate the priorities of the different

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types of agencies involved in missing persons service delivery, and could therefore assist key agencies like the NMPCC to determine how to employ the most effective training requirements depending on the service. Targeted training could be more efficient than applying universal training. However, this would need to be investigated further with a greater number of participants.

### *Sharing information*

Legislation, policies, procedures and guidelines for both government agencies and NGOs can be complex and challenging. Privacy laws have been enacted at both the Commonwealth level and at each state/territory level. The legislation is primarily in place to protect the right of the individual, which presents difficulties when attempting to access information about missing persons. The complexity of the legislation can make it difficult for both government agencies and NGOs to access information.

Agencies need to share relevant information in order to obtain an effective response. For example, in the case of young people, inter-agency agreements should specify the types of information needed to ensure the safety of those who have run away. Different agency confidentiality guidelines can present difficulties for information sharing. An example of effective inter-agency collaboration are the Interagency Guidelines for Child Protection in New South Wales, including guidelines for the exchange of information among agencies relating to child protection.

Parents could also be important partners in information sharing. Where appropriate (depending on the age of the child or young person as well as the circumstances), it may be helpful for parents to access information that agency staff may not be able to obtain. It could also be useful to access records from schools, social services and other agencies. However, at all times, such decisions must take into account the safety and protection of young people and, in some instances, there may be child protection reasons why it is not appropriate for parents to have access to such information. More dialogue is needed in the consideration of these issues.

It was identified at the roundtable discussion that it would be beneficial to have a referral service for the police to access for advice on how to cope with some of the more problematic elements of missing persons cases. This may ease some of the burden on the police. With existing resources and large caseloads, there is little scope for the police to provide support services to families and friends during the period of time the person is missing (Jacques 2002). One respondent to the online questionnaire suggested:

... sharing information between search agencies would also be beneficial, as different agencies have different techniques which could be accessed by each other. Also the transfer of information between different search agencies may allow for some informal cross training and access to different skills.

An important barrier to the sharing and accessing of information identified during the course of this research project related to Commonwealth and state/territory privacy legislation. Privacy legislation was identified by the police, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service, and the families and friends of missing persons as a major barrier to accessing timely information from relevant services such as banks, Centrelink, Medicare and the Australian Taxation Office. A response in the online questionnaire indicated that there can be a 14-day delay in providing information, when it is released, which presents difficulties as every day is crucial in a missing person investigation. One of the problems is that going missing is not a crime, which means that even the police may have difficulty accessing information and this can severely hinder their investigations. During the roundtable discussions, it was revealed that Victoria Police can no longer do searches for The Salvation Army because of both privacy issues and the cost involved. The roundtable identified a current debate emerging in Europe, which balances the notion of privacy principles against the rights of people to know they are being sought.

Table 9 details responses given by the police and other search agencies when asked about the barriers that may exist in accessing information about missing persons. The majority of the responses related to Commonwealth, state and territory privacy laws (n=13) and the corresponding inability to obtain information from banks, the Australian Taxation Office or Centrelink. There was a number of respondents who also noted that it was often not possible to obtain information from mental health institutions, homeless organisations and youth organisations when all they were trying to establish was whether the person was alive and well.

<b>Table 9: Perceptions of barriers that may exist when accessing information about missing persons<sup>a</sup></b>			
<b>Barriers in accessing information about missing persons</b>	<b>Police (n=6)</b>	<b>Search agencies (n=3)</b>	<b>Total</b>
Privacy laws <sup>b</sup>	7	6	13
<i>Privacy Act 1988</i> (Cth)	5	3	8
State and territory privacy laws	2	3	5
Professional code of conduct	2	2	4
Agency policy	6	2	8

a: Respondents were asked about the barriers that exist when accessing information about missing persons; n=9

b: This privacy laws category is the combined total of both the *Privacy Act 1988* and the combined state and territory privacy laws category, hence the total is greater than n=9

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

The online questionnaire results also highlighted privacy laws and organisational policies/cultures as significant barriers. Frustration with obtaining information from other agencies was also highlighted in the consultations with key stakeholders. Privacy laws are also an

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issue for NGOs; not just the searching agencies, but organisations such as the Wesley Mission and Wayside Chapel that come into contact with missing persons:

We are required to tiptoe around the privacy legislation and all we want to establish is that the person is safe/well and has left on their own accord (police survey respondent about getting information from psychiatric and/or care facilities).

Conversely, many of the outreach services interviewed in the consultations asserted that they have a responsibility to protect the privacy of their clients. As one participant explained, if their organisation gives information to police or other agencies, this can appear to be a breach of trust to their clients, and the client may not come back. Since the priorities of outreach services lie with their clients, they are not likely to compromise their needs. Additionally, it was noted that going missing is not a crime, and therefore agencies have to respect the fact that some people want to stay missing. However, as one participant pointed out, most outreach services are so under-staffed and under-resourced they are often only concerned with providing the most basic needs (for example, food and shelter), and probably deal with missing persons every day and do not know it.

## Public awareness and assistance

During consultations, key stakeholders acknowledged that the media had an important and valuable role in missing persons investigations, particularly in the cases of elderly people with dementia and young children. The AMBER Alert program (America's Missing Broadcast Emergency Response) is an example of effective media cooperation and assistance. This is a voluntary partnership between law enforcement and the media to activate an urgent bulletin when a serious child abduction case is reported to the police. The AMBER Alert program has been implemented in all 50 states of the United States (NCJRS 2005). The plan was originally developed in 1996 following a search for nine-year-old Amber Hagerman. While riding her bicycle near her home, Amber was kidnapped and murdered. Following this incident, a search plan template was devised that involved community resources and the media. By using television, radio and electronic highway signs, an abductor could be located more quickly.

The following basic criteria must be met before a law enforcement agency can initiate an AMBER Alert:

- the child must be under 18 years of age
- there must be confirmation that the child has been abducted
- police must have sufficient descriptors to make a search for the child possible, such as descriptions of the child, abductor, accomplices or the suspect's vehicle
- most importantly, police must judge that the child is in serious danger or risk of harm, and be convinced the broadcast will help find the child.



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Canada introduced the AMBER Alert system in 2002. Since 2002, there have been 16 AMBER Alert activations in Canada: eight from Ontario, three from both Alberta and British Columbia, and two from Quebec. Seven of the children were located as a result of the information broadcast at the time of the incident.

The United Kingdom Police National Missing Persons Bureau, which is the centre for the exchange of information connected with the search for missing persons both nationally and internationally, has recently launched Child Rescue Alert, an initiative to save abducted children from being murdered. The scheme works in a similar way as AMBER Alert by interrupting television and radio programs with immediate news flashes that a young person has been snatched and is at risk of serious harm or death. By working with the media, police are able to spread the message to a vast cross-section of the public, asking them to keep their eyes and ears open and to call the police emergency number if they have crucial information (<http://www.missingpersons.police.uk>).

In Queensland, a child abduction alert system based on the AMBER Alert was introduced in December 2004. This initiative came at a time when public awareness of missing persons issues was heightened as the result of the disappearance of a highly publicised case of a young boy in southern Queensland, a case which still has not been solved. To date, the AMBER Alert system has not been introduced in any other jurisdiction.

A number of police jurisdictions cooperate with television (Nine Network) for a regular program, *Missing Persons Unit*, which details specific missing persons investigations. Some popular international television shows have also helped to raise the profile of missing persons. For example, the NMPCC provides profiles of current missing persons for display at the end of *Missing Persons Unit*, *Without a Trace* and Foxtel's *Crime Investigation Unit*, which has led to more public understanding and in some cases has helped resolve the investigation.

Information on people who have been reported missing is now available on official internet sites in most countries. In Australia, the NMPCC site is at <http://www.afp.gov.au/national/missing>. Photographs and profiles are posted on these sites to assist with the investigation or search for missing persons. There is also provision for anyone who may have sighted a missing person to report this via the internet. The New South Wales Police Force MPU also has a website where searches can be conducted for missing persons (<https://www.ebiz.police.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons/enquiry/Search.jsp>).

A respondent to the online questionnaire suggested that:

... apart from publicising individual missing person cases, there was a need to promote general awareness of missing persons and the risks associated with people going missing, and where to go to get help. Broadcasting material such as the DVD *Missing*, a joint initiative of FFMPU and the New South Wales Police Force MPU, covers Aboriginal people who go missing

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and helps to relay messages that will assist with the prevention and location of missing persons. These could be modified for wider community consumption with periodically refreshed messages.

The NMPCC has developed a media and marketing advertising campaign to raise awareness within the broader community regarding the significance of missing persons as an issue. A campaign strategy has been developed and implemented that focuses on the key at-risk groups of going missing.

## Summary

The main agencies involved in the investigation or search for people who go missing in Australia are the police and The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service. Each police agency in Australia has its own missing person criteria and risk assessment procedures, and these are used to prioritise cases. Risk assessment procedures differ across jurisdictions and have been based on models developed in both the United Kingdom and the United States. The most crucial aspect of the risk assessment process is to be able to determine if the missing person is at high risk of coming to some sort of harm and therefore requires a high-priority investigation.

Coordination with other relevant agencies, including both the government and nongovernment sectors, would improve the police response to missing persons reports. This could be particularly useful for those incidents involving young people in care. Excellent models of intervention projects involving the police and other agencies are already in existence, for instance family violence and domestic violence intervention models. Privacy laws and associated barriers to accessing information emerged as a consistent theme in this research. The need for specialised police training and training across other agencies that may be involved in missing persons incidents was identified. It was also recognised that the media can play an important and positive role.

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## **Supporting missing persons, their families and friends**

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## The need for support

Previous Australian research estimated that around 330,000 people across Australia are affected each year as a direct result of people going missing, approximately 12 people for each incident. A survey of families and friends of missing persons found that 37 percent suffered physical and/or mental health problems, 23 percent sought some type of medical attention and 22 percent experienced a major health impact (Henderson & Henderson 1998). The research findings highlighted the need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons. Support, however, was defined in different ways. Some needed practical search assistance, information and advice, while others needed practical support in the home so that they could concentrate their efforts on searching (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Some felt that their emotional needs could be met by support from family and friends, while others preferred professional counselling (Henderson & Henderson 1998). These varying levels of support were confirmed by the FFMPU, which stated that families often required practical support initially, then if their family member or friend remained missing for a longer period of time, they often needed emotional support.

In the present study, the response from the four families and friends of missing persons to the questionnaire was mixed. Two said that they would have liked access to counselling and support services from the very early stages of the investigation and that this was a time which was particularly distressing. Two said that counselling would have been beneficial around two to four weeks after the person went missing, and that initially, knowledge that the police were doing everything they could to locate the missing person was more important. One of the families who completed the questionnaire detailed their needs at the various stages:

Initially, you want to know someone in authority is interested and cares.  
During investigations you need to be kept well informed of progress. It's important along the way to see some sensitivity and empathy from police officers in processes like collecting DNA, communicating progress, completing paperwork ...

None of the four family members or friends who completed the questionnaire was offered any information from the police on available counselling and support services at the time their family member went missing. One was made aware of The Salvation Army Counselling Services through friends, and when this service was accessed, it was found to be excellent. Another respondent mentioned that when they were finally made aware of the counselling services provided by the FFMPU, this service was also found to be excellent. However, it took until six months after the family member or friend went missing to learn that the FFMPU provided such a service. When asked if there was anything that could have helped more when their family member went missing, one respondent said:

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... anything that would have reduced the feeling of bewilderment and isolation, also access to better mental health services for the missing person prior to the disappearance and a more committed attempt at treatment (by the missing person) may have avoided the person going missing.

It must be emphasised that there were only a small number of family and friends who completed the questionnaire and that their experiences were some years ago. However, these experiences highlight how families and friends can be affected when a person goes missing, and the importance of regular communication on the progress of the investigation. It is also important to remember that the FFMPU counselling service in New South Wales has only been in operation since late 2002 and as such may not have been established at the time some of the family members went missing.

It has been well documented in research that the response from others, including family and friends, victim support services, police and other relevant agencies, is crucial for the recovery of victims of crime (see, for example, Cook, David & Grant 1999). Responses to victims of crime have been considerably enhanced through the establishment of a legislated Charter of Victims Rights in several states and territories. In the case of missing persons incidents, such charters are relevant where there is a suspected or known crime.

## Impact on families and friends

The grief and loss that family members and friends can experience when someone goes missing have been referred to as ambiguous loss. The unresolved grief associated with ambiguous loss, in the simplest of terms, has been defined as 'here, but not here' (Boss 1999). For families and friends, ambiguous loss can exist when an individual is physically absent but psychologically present. This is because it is unclear whether their missing family member or friend is alive. When someone is missing, there is no proof of death, no funeral, minimal public grieving and no closure. The sense of not knowing creates ambiguity and the result is high stress. As a result, ambiguous loss can be the most stressful loss that people can face (Boss 1999). Boundary ambiguity is the experience faced by families when there is no clear sense of who is, or is not, part of the family. Boundary ambiguity is exacerbated by each family member not necessarily being on the 'same page' in terms of their response to having someone go missing. The following observations have been made in relation to family boundary ambiguity:

- the higher the boundary ambiguity in the family system, the greater the helplessness (lack of control) and the greater the likelihood of individual and family dysfunction such as depression and conflict
- in the short term, family boundary ambiguity may not be dysfunctional

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- if a high degree of family boundary ambiguity persists over time, the family system is at risk of becoming highly stressed and subsequently dysfunctional
  - families in varying cultural contexts differ in how they perceive their family boundaries even after similar events of loss or separation (Boss 2002).

The following intervention strategies for families experiencing ambiguous loss have been made:

- label the ambiguity as a major stressor for family members in recognition of their situation
- provide a setting and structure for family meetings, so that they can build meaning together and reduce intra-familial ambiguity
- provide as much information as possible about their situation to reduce the uncertainty
- provide families with sources and choices of support for their situation to increase the likelihood of social confirmation of their situation
- families should be encouraged and provided with a format within which they can work to find some meaning in their loss (Boss 2002).

Celebrations such as birthdays and Christmas can be difficult. When someone is missing as a result of a reportedly unmotivated absence, expectations regarding continuity of the remaining family relationship can be disrupted. The family is often not able to complete normal life events and move on. This occurs because family members are waiting for some type of action, either the return of the missing person or some news of their whereabouts, to return the family to normal functioning. Family members can become fixed in the present and it is often with reluctance (including guilt) that they begin functioning again. The longer the duration of the absence, the greater the obstacle for renewing contact can be (Hogben 2006).

## Vulnerable groups

The literature, consultations with key stakeholders and the roundtable discussion identified particular sub-groups as being vulnerable, both as missing persons and as the families of missing persons. The groups identified here are indicative of vulnerable groups only and there are likely to be other groups that have not been identified. Consultations with key stakeholders confirmed that there could be some shame associated with the circumstances of a person's disappearance for people from CALD backgrounds. Some of the existing counselling practices could be inappropriate for this group of people. In New South Wales, the FFMPU has made provision for people from CALD backgrounds by offering information about services in several languages and the FFMPU counsellor utilises interpreter and translating services as necessary to ensure access to this service. The consultations with key stakeholders highlighted the fact that there could be better avenues of communication

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among organisations responsible for health services. In particular, there was very little follow-up on cases that had been referred from mainstream health services and mental health services.

Consulted organisations were unanimous on the influence mental health has on a person going missing, and the accompanying problems this entails for service provision. Housing was a particular problem area. One key stakeholder commented:

Many move around. They often become unsettled, and even if they settle into housing accommodation or something similar, if someone moves in next door or nearby they do not like, they may become disruptive or wish to leave (interview notes).

This opinion was shared by another key stakeholder who identified the biggest gap for people with a mental illness as housing:

Many sufferers are put into untested housing for mental illness sufferers to use, and therefore what is on offer is not very good. Generally the hospital will try to find accommodation, which is often the cheapest they can find (for example, boarding houses), and the person will then most likely be followed up by community mental health teams. However, this puts the person afflicted with mental health issues in contact with others in the low-cost housing, for example low socioeconomic people, alcoholics, drug users et cetera. Association with these people can make it worse for the person, as there is less stability and fewer positive influences in their lives. In these situations, the person tends to lose contact with their families as well (interview notes).

Schizophrenia was particularly singled out by a respondent who works with mental health issues, 'Schizophrenic patients are more transient when they leave an institution than other patients with a mental illness' (interview notes).

The reunion of missing persons with their families was also an issue consistently raised in the research. Most concurred that there is a dearth of research and services for reunification and post-reunification issues. The Wayside Chapel (a drop-in centre in Sydney's Kings Cross) pointed out that once a person has been located, the family and located person do not have any assistance in mediating the reunion: 'Relief for loved ones often turns to anger, and there needs to be a more gradual process promoted. This could include mediation sessions' (interview notes).

The Wayside Chapel representatives noted that in some cases where people were endeavouring to trace their adoptive parents or children who were adopted, clients build up a gradual relationship via writing letters, with initial meetings being arranged under the supervision of a mediator or counsellor. They suggested that this could be adapted to suit the needs of missing persons reunification, as many people who have gone missing in the

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first place have underlying issues with families that often still exist when they return. Addressing the underlying issues of why some people leave was repeatedly mentioned as an area that needs further examination.

## **Current services in Australia**

### **Role of police**

The need for appropriate and timely referral to counselling/support services may not always be recognised, particularly by the police. In the online questionnaire, when the police were asked if they provided any information on support/counselling services to families and friends in the early stages of the investigation, one reply stated, 'it was not necessary in the early stage of the investigation in most cases' and 'rarely appropriate at the time of the initial report, and referrals were made later depending on issues or relevance'. Other police services made suggestions and supplied pamphlets with details of relevant support services/counsellors.

The role of the police as only an investigative agency also need to be clarified. By making people aware of the exact responsibility of the police, and possibly by educating the general public, the expectations that families and friends have when they report a person missing to the police may be more realistic. As one police officer noted, 'it can be extremely draining going on the emotional rollercoaster with the families, leading to an emotional draining of the officer who is then not able to give as much attention to the case'.

### **Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit**

The NSW FFMPU is the only designated government service in Australia involved in the delivery of counselling, information and referral services for the families and friends of missing persons. The FFMPU was established in 2000 and has highlighted and addressed the needs of family and friends. Diverse support options have been implemented, including counselling and support, brochures and web-based information, referrals to other relevant services, roundtables addressing relevant groups within the overall population (for example, siblings), and the development of legislation to address the estate management issues of people who are missing. The FFMPU is also involved in law reform, research, publications, sharing of information across agencies in the missing persons sector, and conducting community education and training for police and other organisations in New South Wales (<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons>).

The FFMPU provides services and support for families and friends of missing persons in New South Wales, and in other states and territories where the missing persons



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disappeared in New South Wales or where their last known address was in New South Wales. The FFMPU does not search for people but works closely with search agencies, particularly the police. The FFMPU and the New South Wales Police Force MPU have developed 'Working partnership principles' to ensure that missing persons and their families and friends receive the most effective and coordinated response.

The FFMPU coordinates the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Interagency Forum, consisting of government and nongovernment agencies and family representatives. The aim of the forum is to set strategic directions for the sector in New South Wales and to keep the NSW missing persons sector informed of current issues at state, national and international levels. Current strategic priorities for the FFMPU inter-agency forum are in the areas of mental health, youth and asset management. The FFMPU inter-agency forum utilises smaller working groups or reference groups as required to assist in addressing specific issues and priorities.

The FFMPU also administers a Families and Friends of Missing Persons Support Fund, which has facilitated the development of significant research, projects or resources by organisations who have been successful in receiving a one-off funding grant. For example, in 2003, the Mental Health Association NSW received a funding grant to provide a resource for the families and friends of missing persons to help them cope emotionally. The *Someone is missing* resource is available as a booklet and at <http://www.missingpersons.org.au>. It provides information on emergency contacts, search services, counselling services and self-help and support groups, as well as identifying relevant websites. The advice given relates to understanding experiences (including effects on health, including mental health), grief, loss, anxiety and depression, advice on coping with the prolonged absence of a missing friend or relative, as well as advice on what to expect when the missing person returns.

The FFMPU has particularly recognised that siblings of missing persons have special needs and that these are not always met. A roundtable meeting for siblings of missing persons was conducted in 2005. This provided the opportunity for siblings to come together to talk and listen to each other's experiences. It also enabled the FFMPU to obtain greater insights into how they could develop and tailor future services. The following issues were identified:

- the need to educate police (state and national) and DFAT about how to better work with families of missing people
- the need to change privacy laws to make it easier for a family member or agency to track a missing person
- the need for a website for siblings containing information on other siblings dealing with the same type of situation, showing real faces and telling real stories and experiences.

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## Other agencies

The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service provides generalist counselling services for families of missing persons if required. Other agencies, such as generic counselling or mental health services (Dadich 2003), may provide services relevant to the needs of particular individuals or families, but these are unlikely to have a clear mandate or funding to provide services to missing persons or family and friends affected by those who go missing. Nor are they likely to have specialised knowledge about the issues. It has been suggested that there were too few professional counsellors with experience in working with missing persons internationally, and too little relevant academic literature to inform and guide practitioners (Jacques 2002).

## Improving practice and service delivery

The online questionnaire revealed that the MPUs in all police jurisdictions usually give referrals to specific counsellors/support services to the families and friends of missing persons and the missing persons themselves after they have been found. Counselling and support services are also made available to missing persons if they need assistance to be reunited with their family and/or friends. It was also thought that more access to mental health services would be beneficial. If the missing person is a young person who indicates that they do not want to be reunited with their family and there appears to be an element of family dysfunction or child abuse, then the relevant child protection authorities are notified. When a missing person is deceased, counselling and support services are suggested for families and friends.

Prior research has raised some important issues for counselling and support services for families and friends of missing persons as well as the missing persons themselves (Payne 1995). Young people were vulnerable to exploitation and at risk of committing crime, as well as being exposed to other social problems, while adults often left behind families with practical and emotional difficulties. Going missing was one of a range of choices that people in difficulties may make, depending on their approach to problems in their lives and the availability of opportunities. Effective local coordination to focus on reasons for going missing, and on reunions and returns to residential care or home was needed, as well as the provision of emotional and practical help to the people left behind. However, it was also necessary that care be taken to protect people who went missing because they had been subjected to abuse and violence. It was suggested that going missing was a two-way social situation – a person experienced going missing and others experienced the fact that the person had gone missing. The importance of the social reaction of needing to search and when to involve law enforcement/nongovernment agencies in the search was also identified (Payne 1995).

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Examining going missing in terms of the social response to the act of leaving behind social networks can make the people left behind look more favourable and label the missing person as deviant (Payne 1995). A very different picture may be presented from the point of view of the person going missing. While a woman who leaves a violent partner may be regarded as missing by that partner, she would also be regarded by most people as legitimately trying to conceal her whereabouts for her own safety. Similarly, some young people leaving home might be regarded by their parents as missing, but in some instances there may have to be an acknowledgement of their independence (Payne 1995).

### **Increasing awareness among other agencies**

An issue raised in the roundtable discussion was that there was a huge gap in the knowledge base of agencies that were not specifically designated to provide counselling/support services for missing persons, but had a client base that included people at risk of going missing. This is a challenging area, but one that requires attention. The gap in the knowledge base was confirmed during the research. It was extremely difficult to organise interviews with agencies identified as relevant to the missing persons population. Most said that this was not an area that they were concerned with and declined to be consulted. Other agencies who agreed to be interviewed were confused about their role. This highlighted the need to educate agencies that may have a client base relevant to the missing persons population, for example people with drug and alcohol problems, those with mental health problems, those who have been in domestic violence situations, those who have been abused and neglected, and those at risk of suicide. Utilising the services of these agencies and identifying potential problems early may lead to a decrease in the number of people who go missing. The need for social workers and social services to respond to missing persons issues was also identified, with the suggestion that this area has been historically neglected (Payne 1995). While there is a role for the social services to work more collaboratively with local services to help with counselling and support services for missing persons and their families and friends, it is critical that those providing counselling services understand the definitions and expectations involved so that they can respond appropriately (Payne 1995).

There were also some common myths surrounding the timeframe required to make the initial report of a missing person. Some agencies believed that it was necessary to wait 24 hours before making a report. In the consultations with key stakeholders, Mission Australia indicated they had experienced occasions when police would not accept their report of a missing resident because 24 hours had not lapsed from the time it was first noticed the person had gone missing. In fact, a missing person report can be made as soon as there are concerns for the safety or welfare of any person.

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## Good counselling practice

New South Wales is the only state in Australia that provides a free, specialised counselling service that acknowledges unresolved loss in relation to missing persons. The FFMPU has developed best practice principals for counselling families and friends of missing persons to ensure counselling services meet the needs of families and friends of missing persons. These principles were developed in response to the research report *It's the hope that hurts* (Hunter Institute of Mental Health 2001).

The FFMPU counsellor recently completed a Churchill Fellowship to investigate the international approach to counselling for unresolved loss relating to families of missing persons. Particular emphasis was given to developing a framework of appropriate intervention for counsellors who have contact with the families of missing persons (Wayland 2006). The report also outlined a framework for service delivery across Australia by all agencies that are relevant to the missing persons sector. Key recommendations included:

- establishment of specialised support services across Australia to assist those experiencing unresolved loss as a result of having a family member go missing
- development of an online support group for families of missing persons
- introduction and recognition of the concepts of unresolved loss and the risk factor of 'missing' to agencies that may come in contact with those at risk of going missing, as well as those with contact with the families of missing persons
- inclusion of the concept of unresolved loss within the grief module of undergraduate degrees or diplomas to further expand the knowledge and skill set of counsellors in Australia (Wayland 2006).

## Resources and information

Detailed resource material has been developed in the United States for families of missing children (OJJDP 1998). This guide was written by parents and family members who had experienced the disappearance of a child. It contains their combined advice concerning what to expect when a child goes missing, what can be done and where to go to get help. It explains the role that various agencies and organisations play in the search and discusses some of the important issues to be considered. The checklist, 'What you should do when your child is first missing', summarises the most critical steps that parents should take when their child is first missing, including who to call for help, what to do to preserve evidence and where to turn for help (OJJDP 1998). It also provides advice for responding to the media, establishing partnerships with law enforcement agencies and recognising the needs of family members. The materials identify strategies for managing and negotiating specific agencies, systems and relationships that become central to locating someone who is missing.

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However, recognition that other groups of people, not just parents of missing children, may also need help and advice is not available.

The internet provides an alternative means for people to access information and support, and avoid delays. It particularly has the potential to provide services where distance can make face-to-face interviews expensive and impractical (Jacques 2002). It can enable the provision of expert services to individuals and families in remote areas and allow collaboration and sharing of international expertise (Jacques 2002). The internet can be widely used by family members searching and seeking support, as well as sharing experiences.

In New South Wales, the FFMPU has an extensive range of resources available for families and friends of missing persons, including brochures, fact sheets and the FFMPU website (<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/missingpersons>). This includes information on how to assist the police when reporting a missing person; managing financial and property affairs of missing persons; a wallet card providing information to assist with random and unprecedented reactions when reminded of the missing person; and information pamphlets for families and friends about using the media and outlining available counselling services. The wallet card and pamphlets are available in English, Arabic, Dari, Greek, Polish and Vietnamese.

The FFMPU has facilitated a number of roundtable consultations with families and friends of missing persons, as well as conducting or facilitating relevant research to identify gaps in information available. The FFMPU also administers the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Support Fund, which provides one-off funding grants to develop projects and resources. Resources that have been developed in conjunction with the above strategies include fact sheets for siblings, extended family members and parents of siblings; the booklets *Someone is missing* and *A glimmer of hope*; as well as the DVD *Missing*. The FFMPU produces a quarterly e-newsletter and facilitates the sharing of information across agencies in the missing persons sector in New South Wales.

The NMPCC has also developed an e-bulletin to enhance communication across the national missing persons sector. It has also progressed a range of web-based resources for families, particularly those who live in more isolated areas. Family-based publications are available either in hard copy or through the NMPCC's website at <http://www.afp.gov.au/national/missing>. While the internet could be an excellent source for families and friends of missing persons and for missing persons who want to contact their families, it also has the potential to be an important resource for service providers. It was noted at the roundtable discussion that the development of a national web-based resource in Australia would allow those engaged in service delivery for families and friends of missing persons to access resource information from the NMPCC and the FFMPU.

In missing persons cases where it is necessary to manage either financial or property matters, appropriate guidelines need to be developed. New South Wales is one of only four

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jurisdictions in the world with legislation specifically concerning the finances and property of missing persons – *Protected Estates Amendment (Missing Persons) Act 2004* (see Box 2). The other jurisdictions include Guam and the Canadian province, British Columbia. The Australian Capital Territory has also just recently amended legislation to respond to the management of the financial affairs of missing persons (*Guardianship and Management of Property Act 1991*). These amendments to the legislation became effective on 6 September 2007.

### ***Box 2: Good practice example: legislation relating to finances and property of missing persons***

In New South Wales, the *Protected Estates Amendment (Missing Persons) Act 2004* No 86 was gazetted on Friday 17 December 2004 and is now incorporated in the *Protected Estates Act 1983* part 3, s 21C. This Act makes provision for the fact that there can be difficulties in managing a missing person's financial and property affairs. For example, the person may have a rental lease on a property or have bills that need to be paid. The Act enables an application to be made to the Supreme Court to have someone appointed to manage the estate of the missing person. The court must be satisfied that all reasonable efforts have been made to locate the person, and people with whom the person would be likely to communicate have not heard from, or of, the person for at least 90 days. The application can be made to the Supreme Court by the spouse, a relative, a business partner or employee, the Attorney-General, the Protective Commissioner, or any person who has an interest in the estate of the person. This Act makes it much easier for the families of missing persons, particularly as they do not have to apply for a coronial inquest to declare the person legally dead before they can manage the estate. The replication of this legislation in other states and territories in Australia would be very beneficial for all families of missing persons.

## **Integrated service delivery**

Suggestions for actions tailored specifically for young people who go missing and their families are as follows:

- provide prevention materials when responding to calls for service – data from local calls for service to police and other agencies may reveal that certain families have high levels of parent–child conflict; families could be provided with information on conflict resolution strategies and resources for additional parent and juvenile support
- use respite care – young people could be taken to a respite care centre facility where they and their parents could participate in counselling to resolve any ongoing conflict

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- use 'missing from care' forms – detailing physical description, recent photograph, distinguishing marks, date and time last seen, suspected destination and companion, address of family and other known contacts, pertinent details from previous runaway episodes, other relevant risk factors
  - determine whether absences are likely to be voluntary or involuntary
  - divert appropriate cases to a community-based organisation
  - refer young people to appropriate social service providers
  - implement a specialised patrol
  - provide safe locations for young people
  - use secure placement where appropriate
  - use transportation aides and free transportation services
  - interview young people on return (Dedel 2006).

This kind of response requires cooperation among a range of agencies. Joint protocols can provide valuable clarification of the respective responsibilities of agencies involved with missing persons as well as processes through which to share information. These agencies can include the police, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, child protection and family violence services, and nongovernment search agencies. In the case of young people who run away from care in particular, protocols would offer clear guidance on how best to respond to unauthorised absences from care, which in turn would ensure an appropriate, coordinated response based on a robust framework that would best ensure the safety of the child.

In this research, the online questionnaire asked how to improve the effectiveness of missing persons investigations. Suggestions were made by the police and search agencies (see Table 10). Respondents were asked to list three ways to improve effectiveness. The suggestions were varied, but creating national databases on related missing persons information (n=3), enhancing privacy laws (n=2), community awareness (n=2) and better cooperation with other agencies (n=2) were suggested more than once. It is important to note however, that the number of respondents who answered this question was low (n=7).

**Table 10: Perceptions of how to improve the effectiveness of missing persons investigations<sup>a</sup>**

<b>Suggested strategies</b>	<b>Police (n=6)</b>	<b>Search agencies (n=3)</b>
Privacy laws relaxed/overcome	1	1
Improved communication equipment	1	0
Increased police staffing levels	1	0
Remove costs associated with Births, Deaths and Marriages checks	1	0
National database for missing persons	2	0
National dental records/unidentified bodies database	1	0
Faster results from government agencies (for example, Centrelink)	1	0
Uniform missing persons definition	1	0
Better cooperation with other agencies	0	2
Community awareness of missing persons	0	2
Cross-training across different search agencies	0	1

a: Respondents were asked their views on how to improve the effectiveness of missing persons investigations; n=9

Source: AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery [computer file]

Most of these suggestions reflect the observations made during the consultations with key stakeholders and the roundtable discussion. The only response not mentioned previously was 'improved communication equipment'. The type of communication equipment was not mentioned, and therefore it is difficult to ascertain what is needed from this comment alone. When looking at the figures in Table 10, even though the numbers are small, it is interesting to note that the police are more concerned with improving the information gathering side of missing persons (for example, creating national databases, access to other agencies' databases), while the search agencies have more interest in improving partnerships and community awareness. Although this requires a more detailed examination with a greater number of participants, the difference in priorities may help missing persons organisations such as the NMPCC to facilitate discussion on priorities within the national missing persons sector. Police promoting the development of national databases in both the questionnaire and consultations is promising for agencies like the NMPCC and CrimTrac, which rely on the police to collect much of the missing persons data.

## Summary

The need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons, and for missing persons themselves, has been consistently identified in the literature. This need was



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also noted in this research. In particular the families who completed the questionnaire all found that support services were not readily available. Once again, it must be emphasised that only a small number of families completed the questionnaire. It must also be emphasised that in New South Wales particularly, service provision for families and friends of missing persons has been greatly improved with the introduction of the FFMPU counselling service at the end of 2002.

Consultation with key stakeholders indicated that population groups such as CALD people and gay, lesbian and transgender people often have particular issues that may inhibit them accessing services. Quite specific strategies may be needed to build linkages between these groups and the missing persons services sector. Mental health services also appear to rarely recognise the needs of people who may be at risk of going missing.

The FFMPU is an example of a model of good practice for the implementation of integrated counselling/support services for the families and friends of missing persons. A national approach to supporting those left behind when someone goes missing is currently being developed by the NMPCC with Australian Government funding.

## 5

# Good practice in early intervention and prevention

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## Risk factors

Good practice in early intervention and prevention for missing persons needs to be based on programs that address the risk and protective factors surrounding why people go missing. The lack of consistent and rigorous data collected in Australia relating to missing persons limits the extent to which this report can confidently recommend practices that will reduce the incidence of people going missing or improve service delivery. Once consistent and comprehensive data on missing persons are recorded and analysed, this will provide an evidence base for further research to determine the interaction between the risk factors that are most likely to influence why people go missing.

Models of prevention and related strategies suggested here are based on the potential risk factors for people who go missing that have been identified in this research. These include mental health issues, illicit drug and alcohol use, family violence, family conflict, and child abuse and neglect. These risk factors relate to individual and family behaviours that may be moderated through early intervention and preventative strategies that are also applicable to other kinds of social problems, for example family violence, illicit drug and alcohol use, juvenile crime, and child abuse and neglect.

Targeting existing agencies that provide services for people who present with similar risk factors as those that define the missing persons population is a logical place to begin. Services that promote protective factors may also need to be identified. Protective factors can be typically described as factors that reduce the impact of an unavoidable negative event; help individuals avoid or resist temptations to engage in antisocial behaviour; reduce the chances that people will start on a path likely to lead to antisocial behaviour; and/or promote an alternative pathway (National Crime Prevention 1999). It is acknowledged that there are some inevitable reasons for people going missing, including categories such as homicide and accident or misadventure that, in most cases, would not be able to be prevented through early intervention. Throughout this chapter, boxed examples of good practice are provided. Elements of these models could be modified to suit intervention and preventative practices for missing persons.

One avenue for a better understanding of why people go missing is to conduct post-return interviews. At present, there appears to be no coordinated approach to the collection of information from missing persons and their families on why the person went missing in the first place. Post-location interviews, especially for people who repeatedly go missing, people who go missing from institutions, and young people who go missing from either home or care would include an explanation of why they left and their experiences when missing, as well as the support they may have required before they went missing and during the time they were missing. This could assist in tailoring services and responses for intervention and preventative strategies.

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The prevention model developed by the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention (AISRAP) could have relevance for missing persons. By conducting a 'psychological autopsy' on people who have committed suicide, the motivations and trigger factors behind suicidal behaviour are examined through interviews with families and friends. This model could be piloted for located missing persons and their families to complement an analysis of the data, and could be particularly useful for missing persons incidents recorded by organisations other than the police. This has the potential to find out more about the reasons people go missing, and the family and personal problems that may have led to that decision.

### *Box 3: Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention*

The Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention (AISRAP) promotes and conducts research into preventing suicide behaviours in Australia. Its services include a database on suicide mortality available to both government and nongovernment agencies on request. They run the Life Promotion Clinic, a referral service, from a local hospital with private practitioners for individuals with suicidal behaviours, offering services for the individual outside the hospital setting. Accredited suicide prevention skills training workshops are run by the AISRAP, offering knowledge and skills-based training for professionals and consumers in suicide prevention, intervention and post-intervention. In addition, the AISRAP performs what is known as a 'psychological autopsy' on suicide victims. This involves interviewing relatives and friends of the victim to paint a picture of their mental state, behaviours and habits prior to the event. Although not a framework for prevention per se, the AISRAP website and ideas may be useful for content and development ideas for an NMPCC national missing persons website.

A range of prevention frameworks has already been developed for substance abuse, homelessness, suicide and crime. Underpinning these frameworks are risk factors that have been identified as increasing the likelihood that individuals and/or neighbourhoods are more likely to engage in, or experience, similar problems as well as protective factors that could help prevent these from occurring. There are individual, family and community risk factors common to many social problems, and it is important to consider how preventative strategies developed to address one may also influence other adverse behaviours or events. To develop a framework to prevent persons from going missing, the literature on the prevention of substance abuse, homelessness, suicide and offending was examined. Table 11 outlines the risk factors identified for suicide. Many of these risk factors apply to people who go missing, for instance sexual orientation, relationships and family connectedness, mental health, problems with the law, loss and grief, and family background.

**Table 11: Identified risk factors for suicide**

<b>Risk factors</b>	
Stress and crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Need to understand why some people succumb to stress more so than others</li><li>• Key is to understand the relationship between current stress and the underlying vulnerabilities and resourcefulness that a person brings to a crisis</li><li>• Determine what events may cause a suicide</li><li>• Build-up of stress from different events increases the risk</li></ul>
Suicidal thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Common among young people, but without the existence of other risk factors in a youth's life it is generally not a risk factor for the majority of the population</li></ul>
Sexual orientation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Suicide among gay-identified young men often occurs after self-identifying as gay, but before either publicly identifying as gay or having a same-sex experience</li><li>• Gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual people more likely to have a range of mental disorders</li></ul>
Physical illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stressor in all ages, but particularly older people</li><li>• Increased risk looks like occurring when this is accompanied with mental illness and/or harmful drug use</li><li>• Effective palliative care is seen as a protective factor</li></ul>
Relationships, social networks and connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community connectedness is linked to the development of health and wellbeing</li><li>• Positive relationships in schools, family, community and among peers is a protective factor</li><li>• Living alone may increase risk in older people, particularly combined with mental illness and drug use</li></ul>
Societal and cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• People of certain faiths (for example, Catholicism and Islam) that prohibit suicide have lower rates</li><li>• Moral attitudes affect suicidal behaviour</li><li>• Risk factor in positive portrayal of suicide</li><li>• Increased individualism and higher expectations for youth can be a risk, but difficult to prove</li><li>• Moves to improve social capital and community capacity as a protective factor (although no proof of influencing suicide rates)</li></ul>
Availability of means of suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Accessibility and availability of tools used for suicide increase the likelihood of that means being used</li></ul>
Mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Depression is the most common mental illness related to suicide. This link strengthens with age, with particular concerns for depressed older men</li><li>• Older people with mood disorders are particularly vulnerable, but sufferers are believed to respond well to treatment. Elimination of this disorder could significantly reduce suicide attempts particularly among older adults</li><li>• Discrimination of sufferers believed to contribute to suicide</li><li>• People with mental illness who do not receive treatment have higher suicide rates</li><li>• Suicide is linked to harmful drug use, including alcohol</li></ul>

**Table 11: continued****Risk factors**

Problems with the law	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suicides account for nearly half of prison deaths in Australia</li> </ul>
Loss and grief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Particularly relevant for mid and older adult life</li> <li>• Frequency and timing of loss is pertinent, particularly the inability to deal with one loss before another occurs</li> <li>• Unresolved loss over a spouse is also quite prevalent in suicide attempts</li> </ul>
Family background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Young people are at greater risk if they are not living with biological parents, come from separated/divorced or single parent families, have poor parental relationships, experience interpersonal conflict</li> <li>• For both young people and adults, risk increases with sexual and/or physical abuse in childhood, family history of abusive and deviant behaviour, including drug use</li> <li>• Mental health of family member</li> <li>• Children of Vietnam veterans in Australia</li> </ul>
Socioeconomic status and employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social disadvantage has strong links to suicide</li> <li>• Education, unemployment and homelessness have also been linked</li> <li>• There is a link shown between unemployment or part-time employment and higher suicide and drug use rates. Unemployment is a particular cause of psychological distress in young people, but this is reversed with re-employment</li> </ul>
Media presentations of suicide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in suicide rates after publicity around celebrity suicides</li> <li>• This can include fictional portrayal of suicide, documentaries, suicide stories in general and programs designed to inform on suicide</li> <li>• Programs for marginalised youth about suicide may have adverse affects on them</li> </ul>

Source: Department of Health and Aged Care 2000b

## Applying prevention models

A framework of action is needed to implement preventative strategies. The public health approach has often been considered a complementary prevention model for existing criminal justice and crime prevention approaches (AIC 2003), and this may also have applicability for missing persons prevention. This model operates at a primary, secondary and tertiary level of prevention, and it concerns communities and populations as a whole. Wherever possible, interventions focus on populations at the greatest risk. The emphasis on prevention, rather than treating the problem after the fact, makes it a potentially ideal model for missing persons prevention. There are usually four common steps in designing a response using the public health model. These are:

- defining and monitoring the extent of the problem
- identifying the causes of the problem

- 
- formulating and testing the ways of dealing with the problem
  - applying measures that are found to work (AIC 2003).

In a public health approach, primary, secondary and tertiary prevention measures can translate into the following intervention types:

- **universal interventions (primary)** – approaches aimed at large groups or the general population, without regard to individual risk, for example, missing persons prevention curricula delivered to all pupils in a school or community-wide media campaigns
- **selected interventions (secondary)** – approaches aimed at those considered to be at a heightened risk of going missing by having one or more risk factors (parenting skills training is an example of a selected intervention)
- **indicated interventions (tertiary)** – approaches aimed at those who have already demonstrated the targeted behaviour, for example, young people who run away repeatedly (AIC 2003).

As mentioned previously, it is necessary to develop missing persons preventative strategies for both young people and adults, as the risk factors for going missing generally differ between these groups. Suggestions for strategies to prevent young people going missing are outlined below.

## Preventing young people from going missing

While child abuse and neglect were identified as key risk factors for young people who go missing, other risk factors included family violence, family conflict, alcohol and illicit drug use, school bullying, racism and mental health. This research highlighted that a large proportion of missing persons reported to the police are young people who run away repeatedly from either home or care (see Chapter 2 for more details). Many of the factors attributed to young people who go missing are similar to the factors correlated to young people who are involved in offending, and illicit drug and alcohol abuse. These include an unstable home environment (for example, family conflict), and factors leading to youth suicide.

Family violence and family conflict were particularly highlighted in the consultations with key stakeholders and the online questionnaire. A number of young people go missing from institutions or foster homes, and the fundamental reason for them being there in the first place could have been the result of a disrupted or dysfunctional home life. Taking these factors into consideration, primary intervention methods, particularly early intervention programs, are suggested as being the most appropriate method of preventing young people from going missing. The most relevant preventative frameworks that appear to apply to young people at risk of going missing include:

- developmental crime prevention and early intervention

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- prevention of child abuse and neglect
  - prevention of youth suicide.

Early intervention is the process of identifying and responding early in the life cycle to reduce the risk, or soften the effects, of adverse social and physical environments. One aspect of early intervention is developmental prevention. Developmental prevention, described as intervention 'designed to inhibit the development of antisocial behaviour in individuals, by targeting risk and protective factors that influence human development' (Farrington & Coid 2003: 1), underpins many early intervention programs. Early intervention programs operate across the full continuum of support services and include programs that focus on preventing the development of future problems such as child abuse and neglect, emotional and behavioural difficulties, substance abuse and criminal behaviour, as well as programs that assist and promote the necessary conditions for a child's healthy development (NSW Department of Community Services 2006). An example of early intervention programs with target groups experiencing risk factors similar to those identified for young people who go missing from both home and care are outlined in Box 4. Examples of early intervention programs that aim to increase protective factors are outlined in Boxes 5 and 6.

#### *Box 4: Pathways to Prevention*

This project is a partnership between Griffith University and Mission Australia. It began in 2001 with the aim of involving family, school and community in a broad set of planned interventions to prevent antisocial behaviour among four to six-year-old pre-school children. The program focuses on enhancing communication and social skills, and empowering families, schools and communities to provide supportive environments for positive development (Homel et al. 2006). Many of the children in this program come from CALD and Indigenous backgrounds. Early results are encouraging as they show positive impacts on language skills regardless of a child's home language, and that boys benefited more in terms of reductions in difficult behaviour (Homel et al. 2006).

#### *Box 5: Triple P: Positive Parenting Program*

This program is a multi-level model of behavioural family intervention that aims to prevent and treat the risk factors associated with severe behavioural and emotional problems in pre-adolescent children where family relationships and family functioning strongly influence children's development. Family risk factors such as poor parenting, family conflict and non-supportive environments can increase the susceptibility of young people to major behavioural and emotional problems including substance abuse, antisocial behaviour and juvenile crime. The program seeks to enhance parents' self-sufficiency and resourcefulness; promote children's social, emotional and behavioural development; and promote safe, nurturing and non-violent environments (Gant & Grabosky 2000).



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### *Box 6: PeaceBuilders: school-based violence and crime prevention*

The aim of this program is to reduce bullying and the risk factors associated with antisocial behaviour through school-based prevention programs. Wider community problems of violence and antisocial behaviour are often manifest in school settings. PeaceBuilders seeks to change the way children think and act in their physical and interpersonal environment. It is based on the premise that violence and antisocial behaviour can be reduced through early intervention by increasing children's resilience and reinforcing positive behaviours. In addition, altering the school environment to emphasise rewards and praise for desirable behaviour can reduce bullying and aggressive behaviour. Evaluation of the program showed that detentions and suspensions as well as the level of truancy fell after the introduction of the program and parent involvement in the school increased (Gant & Grabosky 2000).

Another example of early intervention strategies are programs that are designed to prevent child abuse and neglect, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Child abuse prevention is a complex and sensitive issue involving all levels of government as well as many different community organisations. The realities of practical case management mean that child abuse prevention is often situated within a continuum of interventions that address multiple aspects of family behaviours. This includes domestic violence prevention, parenting skills, relationship skills and family law dispute resolution, as well as child abuse prevention (see Box 7 for an example from Western Australia). The current trend is therefore to incorporate the prevention of child abuse and neglect within a broad range of early intervention strategies as part of a coordinated agency network to address family dysfunction generally (James 2000). The term 'early intervention' in a child protection context can be used in two ways. The first refers to intervention as soon as a problem is apparent, and the second is intervention early in a person's life. Interventions to prevent child abuse and neglect have traditionally been referred to on three levels – primary, secondary and tertiary.

### *Box 7: The Columbus Project Pilot: an initiative of the Family Court of Western Australia*

This project attempts to address allegations of child abuse and family violence with child protection implications. It is an early intervention project, whose intent is to 'bring together a range of stakeholders with a view to establishing more streamlined processes, with an emphasis on access to information held by agencies to ensure effective and early intervention' (ADVCH n.d.a). It is a court program that aims to fast-track cases, to use multidisciplinary teams for case management, and to share information and case management collaboration among relevant stakeholders. It is based on Project Magellan in Victoria, using similar benchmarks and others adapted to suit the WA model.

The National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy also offers an Australian model that could be appropriate for preventing young people from going missing. As mentioned earlier, risk factors for youth suicide are similar to the risk factors suggested for young people who go missing. In 1999, Australia's National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) conducted a literature review of youth suicide to develop an evidence-based research agenda. It created a framework for reducing risk and promoting protective factors for youth suicide prevention (NHMRC 1999). This framework delineates four intervention categories: clinical, indicated, selective and universal (see Table 12).

<b>Table 12: Intervention strategies to reduce risk and promote protective strategies for youth suicide</b>	
<b>Intervention category</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Clinical	Persistent or recurrent clinical conditions, for example, depression. Early intervention and treatment is possible on this level
Indicated	Designed for those already displaying at-risk behaviours. Intervention effectiveness relies on appropriate identification of target population, and capacity of appropriate services to deliver the most suitable intervention. Those targeted have already been identified with disturbances
Selective	Risk factors have the potential to be used for these interventions, but 'success depends on the extent to which the risk factor delineates a population carrying a substantial proportion of risk' (NHMRC 1999: 286). Those targeted are people who have been identified as being at high risk
Universal	All members of a population group targeted through identified risk and protective factors. Can look at either changing an element of the social environment or person-centred changes

Source: NHMRC 1999

The NHMRC framework is valuable for the prevention of people going missing on various levels. Primarily, it describes the drawbacks of some types of intervention and the issues that need to be considered when determining intervention strategies such as stigma and labelling. In particular, the report stresses that risk and protective factors for young people are commonly defined by school, peer and family relationships, which have different developmental and social contexts than adults, and therefore clinical interventions targeted at young people may not be as effective in older age groups (NHMRC 1999).

The NHMRC report established certain inclusion criteria for good practice models that would also have validity for a missing persons good practice base. The criteria included the presence of a strong statistically significant association with suicide or suicidal behaviour, risk factors that pre-date suicide or the onset of suicidal behaviour, potential modifiability of the risk or protective factors through intervention, and the proximity of risk relationship to suicide (NHMRC 1999). Of particular importance is the proximity of risk relationship to suicide, as risk and intervention strategies for suicide are often based on studies of non-fatal

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suicide behaviour. The different epidemiology of non-fatal and fatal suicide behaviours, such as the higher number of female non-fatal suicides and male fatal suicides, and the ratio of non-fatal to fatal deliberate self-harm being lower in adolescents than in adults, means that certain interventions are likely to be more effective with teenage females than other population groups (NHMRC 1999). For missing persons, similar distinctions may apply. Risk factors identified through interviews with short-term located young missing persons may have limited applicability to those at risk of becoming a long-term missing person.

## Preventing adults from going missing

Key risk factors identified for adults who go missing included personal crisis, marital problems, alcohol and drug use, financial problems, mental health issues, transient lifestyles and losing contact with families (see Chapter 2). This research identified mental health issues as a major reason for adults to go missing, particularly depression and in some cases schizophrenia, with Alzheimer's disease and dementia linked to many older people who go missing.

There is a need to educate the public on the services and support available for adults who are at risk of going missing. Key preventative strategies may need to be developed at the secondary and tertiary levels, especially for vulnerable groups. Some of the most useful preventative lessons found in the literature relate to:

- mental health
- family violence
- illicit drug and alcohol abuse.

### Mental health

Mental health issues were raised consistently as a factor associated with people going missing. International mental health policy and service provision were reviewed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2001. The report refers to the following issues:

- people and organisations responsible for the delivery of mental health services and strategies communicate, not only among themselves, but also with other services, such as education, employment and housing
- consultation with vulnerable groups and their stakeholders is essential
- some agencies often do not regard themselves as stakeholders and need to be convinced of their importance in this field (WHO 2001).

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Continued education of the public on mental health issues on a universal level, and selected interventions on an individual level targeting those with mental health issues, are advocated in the report. Vulnerable groups include children, older people, abused women, internally displaced groups and refugees. The US Army suicide prevention program outlines an approach that could be employed with groups of people vulnerable to going missing, such as the mentally ill and those with Alzheimer's disease (see Box 8). The model looks at primary intervention, but also addresses the issue through universal and targeted actions including making the broader community aware, and educating peers and employers.

#### *Box 8: US Army suicide prevention program*

Developed by the American Association of Suicidology and the United States Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine, the Army suicide prevention program offers training and awareness for preventing suicide among recruits. The program aims to reduce suicide behaviour through:

- developing positive life coping skills (early intervention)
- encouraging help-seeking behaviour (early intervention, support)
- maintaining constant vigilance
- integrating approaches with existing community programs.

Three areas – life crisis, suicide ideation and suicide behaviour – are identified and linked to key action prevention, intervention and security. Another important dimension to the program is the identification of key people or 'gatekeepers' who are best placed to monitor and identify at-risk behaviour, such as teachers, counsellors, chaplains and health care professionals.

Source: American Association of Suicidology & United States Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventative Medicine n.d.

As identified in this research, Alzheimer's disease and dementia are risk factors for people over the age of 65 years who go missing. As Australia's population ages, this is likely to increase in frequency, and therefore solutions should be explored now. One particular initiative in place is the Safely Home project, which is an example of a successful partnership between Alzheimer's Australia and the NSW police (see Box 9).

Aged care facilities could also play a role in developing preventative strategies for missing persons, especially in relation to the risk factors associated with old age. An example of relevant strategies for aged care facilities include those identified in Box 9. One of the key stakeholders interviewed gave the following explanation for the low number of people who go missing from their organisation:

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- **Staffing** – there is low staff turnover, consistent training for staff, and they do not use agency staff. They felt this was important to provide mentally unstable residents some consistency. New staff are trained for approximately two months alongside regular staff so the residents get used to them, and are not allowed to work alone in the facility during this time. Staff get to know the residents and treat them with respect.
  - **Missing persons procedures** – the facility has a detailed procedure on what to do if someone goes missing.
  - **Promoting a welcoming environment** – the interviewee mentioned that people who go missing are almost always found, and had a desire to return to the facility and not leave again.
  - **Desirable accommodation arrangements** – each resident has a private room. Staff felt that this limited conflict, as it gives residents their own space.
  - **Diverse residents** – although there is a higher proportion of people with a mental illness compared with other aged care facilities, residents are not segregated, allowing those with a mental illness to have a connection with others and a sense of ‘normalcy’.

A formal evaluation needs to be conducted. However, these strategies appear to show promise, not only for older people, but also for those with mental illness and those who have been marginalised from the rest of society – a group of people that could include missing persons. To further develop good practice in this field other agencies with a similar service would also need to be consulted, as this is only one example of an aged care service.

### *Box 9: Safely Home project*

Safely Home was designed to assist find people with dementia, but does not exclude others suffering from memory loss. There are two elements of the program: a Safely Home bracelet and a Safely Home database. People listed on the Safely Home register are issued with a bracelet that contains a 24-hour toll-free number to call if the person is found, and a unique reference number that can link the person to the database for swift identification. Each person registered has a record on the database with relevant information such as previous addresses, aliases, maiden name (if female), physical appearance, former places of relevance to the person, and a current photograph. If a registered person goes missing, the police are then able to quickly access their file on the database and start searching. This also enables carers of dementia sufferers to report someone missing easily. There are similar programs operating in other jurisdictions in Australia (for example, the New South Wales program <http://www.alzheimers.org.au>).

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## Family violence

Family violence was highlighted through consultations with key stakeholders and in the responses as a reason for some people to go missing, but one that the reporting person would be reluctant to disclose. Family violence prevention strategies often involve partnerships among various levels of government, police and community services. Lessons and strategies applied from these projects could be adapted to suit missing persons preventative strategies, in particular lessons from partnerships.

Family violence intervention strategies must be culturally appropriate, particularly for Indigenous Australians. Indigenous-focused interventions should be delivered where possible by Indigenous workers and organisations, offer culturally relevant support services, respect cultural and family obligations and ties, and assist Indigenous people in determining longer-term solutions (Blagg 2000). Box 10 outlines an example of an Indigenous family violence prevention initiative. An important part of this project was concerned with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working together.

## Illicit drug and alcohol use

Considering the perceived impact of illicit drug and alcohol misuse on individuals going missing, the causes should be examined to determine interventions for people who go missing. Interventions for illicit drug and alcohol misuse are more effective when applied early in the life cycle. Accordingly, a number of factors have been identified that may impact on the transition to illicit drug misuse for young people. These include individual factors such as less self-regulatory behaviours, increased alienation, emotional distress and impulsiveness. Family factors include parents who are hypercritical, either reject or are too liberal with their children, child abuse and neglect, and consistent parental abuse (Marsh 1996).

The National Drug Research Institute and the Centre for Adolescent Health in Australia developed a prevention agenda for substance use based on risk and harm. This public health model details preventative strategies on eight levels, moving from a broader universal strategy through to individually targeted strategies, and also includes a research agenda. The prevention agenda is informed by the evidence base on risk and protective factors, with interventions linked to addressing these factors, including within a community-level context (Loxley, Toubmourou & Stockwell 2004). The National Drug Strategy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Complementary Action Plan 2003–2009 provides a nationally coordinated and integrated approach to reduce drug-related harm among Indigenous people that could also be relevant for missing persons (MCDS 2003).

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### *Box 10: Pallert Tooree Larr (strong black women's camp or home)*

This domestic and family violence program for Indigenous women and children in parts of rural Victoria aims to operate a transitional house for Indigenous women and children with specialist family/domestic violence workers; use a planned model of service with better links into both mainstream and Indigenous services; focus on safety, privacy and confidentiality as key issues in a small community; bring services and support to the family in one place; work for the wellbeing of the family; keep a strong focus on community connection; work within the strengths of the community; and offer mentoring to less experienced workers. The model is based on rights, respect and reconciliation. The program has strong links with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous services and workers, and it is recognised that partnerships and collaborations have been essential to its success. It attempts to address the lack of transitional and crisis housing and support for Indigenous families, and the lack of dedicated funding for such programs. With a theoretical and research base, the following good practice elements were adopted for the program:

- core principles of victim safety and perpetrator accountability
- clearly articulated rationale
- incorporate current theory and research
- contribute to effective inter-agency practice
- sensitivity to diverse community needs
- demonstrate capacity for replication
- culturally appropriate service provision (ADVCH n.d.b).

More information can be found at <http://www.austdvclearinghouse.unsw.edu.au>

## **Good practice**

For child matters – recommend that the Youth Liaison Officer visit the child upon their return and obtain details of where they have been, who they have been with, what they have been doing ... Dementia sufferers – contact family and/or aged care facility and recommend the person to be registered on the Safely Home program (police respondent, AIC Survey on missing persons service delivery).

Any intervention and preventative strategies should be based on good practice techniques. Keehley and colleagues (1997) have developed criteria for defining good practice. The Australian Institute of Family Studies has also developed criteria for determining good

practice in sexual assault programs, which complement those of Keehley and colleagues. These are outlined in Box 11.

*Box 11: Criteria for determining good practice*

- Success over time – a practice must have a proven track record
- Quantifiable results – it must be quantifiable
- Innovative – must be recognised by peers as being innovative or creative
- Recognised positive outcome – if quantifiable results are limited, good practice may be recognised through other positive indicators
- Repeatable – a practice should be able to be replicated with modifications, and should establish a clear road map describing how the practice evolved and what benefits are likely to accrue to others who adopt the practice
- Has local importance – the practice must be salient to the organisation wanting the improvement. The topic, program, process or issue does not have to be identical
- Not linked to unique demographics – the practice may have become the result of unique demographics, but it should be transferable to other organisations with the ability to be adapted to local conditions (Keehley et al. 1997).

The assessment of good practice for sexual assault programs for the Australian Institute of Family Studies good practice database includes:

- take account of contemporary research and practice developments in the field
- position diversity as key to the development, understanding and delivery of good practice development
- contribute to improving the response to sexual assault, or are directed at preventing it
- demonstrate a sensitivity towards barriers faced by victims/survivors
- have a clearly defined conceptual framework
- include a process of accountability and evaluation
- demonstrate the capacity for replication (AIFS n.d.).

In addition to employing these general principles of good practice, common themes emerged during this study for developing good practice in missing persons service delivery:

- cultural sensitivity
- age and gender of target group
- inter-agency collaboration.



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Regardless of whether the risk factor is mental illness or family/domestic violence, or whether the strategy involves early intervention or a community awareness campaign, any response must be aware of the age or gender of the target group, tailor projects to address any cultural differences, and involve good inter-agency collaboration among the key stakeholders.

## **Cultural sensitivity**

Preventative strategies for people who are at risk of going missing should be culturally appropriate. Prevention projects may not be effective if they do not reach the target population in a meaningful manner, or in a way that does not convey the appropriate message.

## **CALD populations**

A concern for service delivery for people from CALD backgrounds with mental health problems was identified in this research during consultations with key stakeholders, at the roundtable discussion and in the online questionnaire. Services for CALD groups must involve clear communication and a manner that encourages frank disclosure of the problems, so that any mental illness can be accurately identified.

Commonly identified problems experienced by people within CALD communities have included communication barriers (Bower 1998; MMHA 2004a, 2004b; Seah et al. 2002) and stigma related to mental illness (Bakshi, Rooney & O'Neil 1999; Long et al. 1999; MMHA 2004a, 2004b). The limitations of mental health services for people of CALD background are particularly apparent in rural and remote Australia, and there are considerable challenges in providing specialised services to dispersed populations (Bower 1998). A study found:

- CALD people were more likely to access inpatient services than community-based services
- recently arrived migrants access services at a lower rate than other migrants
- migrant service workers tend to distrust mental health services, thus affecting access to these services (Bower 1998).

Of the suggestions offered for improving service delivery, those relevant for missing persons service delivery in CALD communities include access to translated information, guidelines on the use of interpreters including possible use of video conferencing with interpreters in other states, and the need for bilingual case managers (Bower 1998). One participant consulted from a workplace dealing with CALD people revealed that many people chose not to seek services within their own cultural background, preferring mainstream services. Stigma associated with mental health was cited as a primary reason for seeking help elsewhere.

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Based on extensive research in the area, the Australian Transcultural Mental Health Network has developed a framework for reducing the stigma associated with CALD people who have a mental illness. In the consultations with key stakeholders, it was suggested that people of CALD backgrounds can experience a 'double-loading of stigma', both from within their CALD community and from the mainstream community. The model outlined in Box 12, could be appropriate for missing persons in general (not just to reduce stigma). The seven-step communication campaign may be useful for educating the public about missing persons and the effects, and would complement a public health approach to missing persons prevention.

***Box 12: Framework to reduce stigma about mental illness in transcultural settings***

This framework was developed by the Australian Transcultural Mental Health Network to reduce stigma and labelling of those suffering from a mental illness, and in particular those of a CALD background. The framework is available as a guide for both stakeholders in mental health and associated service providers in the publication *Reducing stigma about mental illness in transcultural settings: a guide* (Bakshi, Rooney & O'Neil 1999). The guide outlines the key concepts in designing a campaign for people from CALD communities (including information on evaluating any change, characteristics of a health promotion campaign and key elements of mental health promotion), and how to develop strategies for service providers, the community, and for the individual consumers and their carers. The guide advocates following a seven-step process to construct public communication campaigns:

1. identify goals suitable for change via mass persuasion
2. make sure the change would be for the public good
3. identify causes and maintenance of target behaviour (for example, stigma)
4. identify the thoughts, feelings and actions associated with the target behaviour
5. identify the most important theme/aspects from steps three and four
6. use the source, message and channel inputs outlined above that will involve the output steps to change behaviour
7. evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign.

Source: Bakshi et al 1999; the guide is available online at <http://www.mmha.org.au>

## **Indigenous populations**

Mental health issues among Indigenous Australians can often reflect other stressors not shared by the rest of the population. Unique to Indigenous Australians are the historical, social and economic issues associated with colonisation (Department of Health and Aged

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Care 2000b). Any services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be appropriately designed for their needs and not just based on mainstream services. There have been attempts in Australia at adopting culturally appropriate mental health services for Indigenous people, for example, the use of narrative therapy in South Australia (Hunter 2002).

Other Australian research also highlighted the need for cultural sensitivity, and recommended the following preventative strategies for Indigenous communities:

- designing, developing and delivering programs that target risk factors at home
- developing and strengthening partnerships with Aboriginal community representatives and the education sector, particularly local schools
- developing and implementing school-based programs that target risk factors at school (Robertson & Demosthenous 2004).

## Age and gender of vulnerable groups

When targeting vulnerable groups to reduce the risk of persons going missing, the age and gender mix of the group should be considered. Chapter 2 documented the factors present at different life stages that contribute to the risk of going missing. There are gender disparities in the ages when males and females are most at risk of going missing, depending on whether the person goes missing intentionally or unintentionally. As a result, general public communication strategies need to be mindful of different target groups. For example, it may be effective to target youth through the use of internet resources, but this may be unsuitable for issues associated with dementia. School-based education programs, such as the example provided in Box 13, are aimed primarily at youths not adults. A useful suicide prevention framework that considers the needs of different ages and genders is the LIFE: living is for everyone framework (see Box 14), which includes strategies in six areas for action according to four different age groups, and has the potential to be segmented further into gender categories.

### *Box 13: Running away: a cry for help?*

School-based intervention programs to prevent people going missing are an example of early intervention through the development of appropriate information packages. In the United Kingdom, the National Missing Persons Helpline (now known as Missing People) provided an information pack, including a video, primarily designed to help educate teachers on missing persons. This program confronted the issue of running away and was targeted at 11–14-year-olds with the aim of developing key life skills. The program, called Running away: a cry for help? is no longer available, however Missing People are in the process of developing an updated resource ([www.missingpeople.org.uk](http://www.missingpeople.org.uk)).

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#### *Box 14: Life: living is for everyone*

The *LIFE: areas for action* (2000a) report developed a framework to reduce the incidence of suicide. The framework addresses four broad goals:

- reduce deaths by suicide across all age groups in the Australian population, suicidal thinking, suicidal behaviour, injury and self-harm
- enhance resilience and resourcefulness, respect, interconnectedness and mental health in young people, families and communities, and reduce the prevalence of risk factors for suicide
- increase support available to individuals, families and communities affected by suicide or suicidal behaviours
- provide a whole-of-community approach to suicide prevention, and extend and enhance public understanding of suicide and its causes.

There are six areas for action:

- promoting wellbeing, resilience and community capacity across Australia
- enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors for suicide and self-harm across the Australian community
- services and support within the community for groups at increased risk
- services for individuals at high risk
- partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- progressing the evidence base for suicide prevention and good practice.

For each action area, there is a list of outcomes with more detailed actions proposed to achieve them. Each action area is divided into four categories: families and children 0–17 years, young adults, adults and older adults. Six strategic performance indicators are identified for the four overarching goals:

- reduced rate of suicide death in the Australian population
- reduced incidence of non-fatal suicidal behaviours
- reduction in probable (and potentially modifiable) risk factors for suicidal behaviour
- enhancement of probable (and potentially modifiable) protective factors for suicidal behaviour
- enhanced community capacity
- increased involvement in development, research and evaluation of suicide prevention strategies that support a national strategic direction.

Source: Department of Health and Aged Care 2000a

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## Inter-agency collaboration

Although often challenging and resource intensive, more effective inter-agency collaboration would improve services for missing persons and their families. Lack of access to information and records from other organisations was cited as a huge barrier to locating missing persons. However, there was debate about whether formalising agreements between partner agencies would be appropriate. Many of those consulted in this research found their informal networks with other agencies had been working well, and felt that formalising agreements either within jurisdictions or nationally could jeopardise the good relationships that some organisations have with one another regarding information exchange. As one police survey respondent noted:

... all other agreements are not formal other than legislative constraints. This is found to be beneficial. Written MOUs [memoranda of understanding] with organisations such as banks would be expected to lead to a reduced flow of information. Responsible use of information and mutual respect presently works well.

There are many examples of successful inter-agency cooperation in Australia. One such example is the FVIP. Its key role is not to offer a solution to family violence, but to coordinate an effective response from the criminal justice system on both a macro level (policy, administrative, technological infrastructure and legislation) and a micro level (case management, individual practitioner decision making and monitoring of these decisions) (Holder & Caruana 2006). It involves a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with 10 core participating agencies that commits them to strategic planning and program review once every two years (Holder & Caruana 2006). The FVIP is a particularly useful model because of the lessons to be learnt about police–community partnership development. The problems highlighted in an evaluation of the FVIP are similar to the issues highlighted during the consultations with the key stakeholders and by respondents to the online questionnaire regarding the police response to missing persons. More information is found in Box 15.

The NMPCC and the FFMPU both convene committees that share information, identify gaps in service delivery and seek resolution of those gaps. However, there is the need for greater engagement from agencies within other sectors, such as mental health, youth and aged care, to broaden the capacity for cooperation and response to missing persons.

Fleming (2006) outlined the challenges of networking and collaboration with police partnerships. In Australia, there is no official mandate for police to work through partnerships and while many police organisations have explored the boundaries of collaboration and multi-agency work, there are no formal policy parameters within which they can work. Most significantly, there is no extra funding available for such activities, and where organisations have sought to work through networks and partnerships, they have done so within existing funding arrangements.

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### *Box 15: Inter-agency collaboration model: the Family Violence Intervention Program*

A potential model for intervention programs for missing persons is the FVIP, which operates in the Australian Capital Territory. One of the key elements in the program was to develop an inter-agency approach to family violence. The evaluation of this project showed that it was successful in promoting inter-agency cooperation between the police and related agencies, including the consistent participation of senior agency and departmental representatives on the overriding committee. The emphasis on inter-agency cooperation resulted in greater information sharing and helped to work towards common goals and philosophies (Australian Capital Territory Department of Justice and Community Safety & Keys Young 2000).

In any inter-agency collaboration, it is inevitable that there will be some setbacks or frustrations to the implementation process. For example, building and maintaining momentum for the FVIP was challenging. Once the framework for the program was developed, it became clear that different agencies had different expectations. Although information sharing improved as time went on, there were still substantial limitations including technical, ethical and confidentiality concerns. The FVIP evaluation outlined the following comments about police procedures:

- ambiguous wording on police protocols, unsympathetic behaviours and attitudes towards victims, lack of police training, inconsistent approaches to dealing with incidents, lack of monitoring and accountability
- police thought that the difficulties in policing domestic violence contributed to their response (Australian Capital Territory Department of Justice and Community Safety & Keys Young 2000).

Making realistic assessment of what is feasible involves mapping the nature and extent of relevant services and their capacity to be involved in specific strategies to improve services and promote early intervention and prevention. The consultative report on police, mental health and related consultations outlines how to identify appropriate agencies for specialised service delivery (ACT Police Consultative Board 2004?). This examines key areas such as police performance, the role of other agencies, information sharing, training and incidence recording. The WHO (2001) report on mental health services contains a mixed economy matrix that could also be employed as a tool to assess services and their capability to address issues and support initiatives aimed at early intervention and the prevention of persons going missing.

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## Developing a prevention framework for missing persons

To develop priorities and strategies for a prevention framework for missing persons, it is important to progress an overall plan of action. A 'spectrum of prevention' model was developed by the United States Prevention Institute, based on programs used for treating developmental disabilities. This model was adapted for prevention in a variety of US national projects such as nutrition, violence prevention and traffic safety (Cohen & Swift 1999). The spectrum of prevention operates on the belief that because problems are multifaceted, prevention functions on different levels. Of relevance to the missing persons intervention agenda is that all six levels of the spectrum were raised in consultations with the key stakeholders, the online questionnaire, roundtable discussion and the literature review as being important contributing factors for preventing people going missing. The six levels of the spectrum are to:

- strengthen individual knowledge and skills
- promote community education
- educate providers
- foster coalitions and networks
- change organisational practices
- influence policy and legislation (Cohen & Swift 1999).

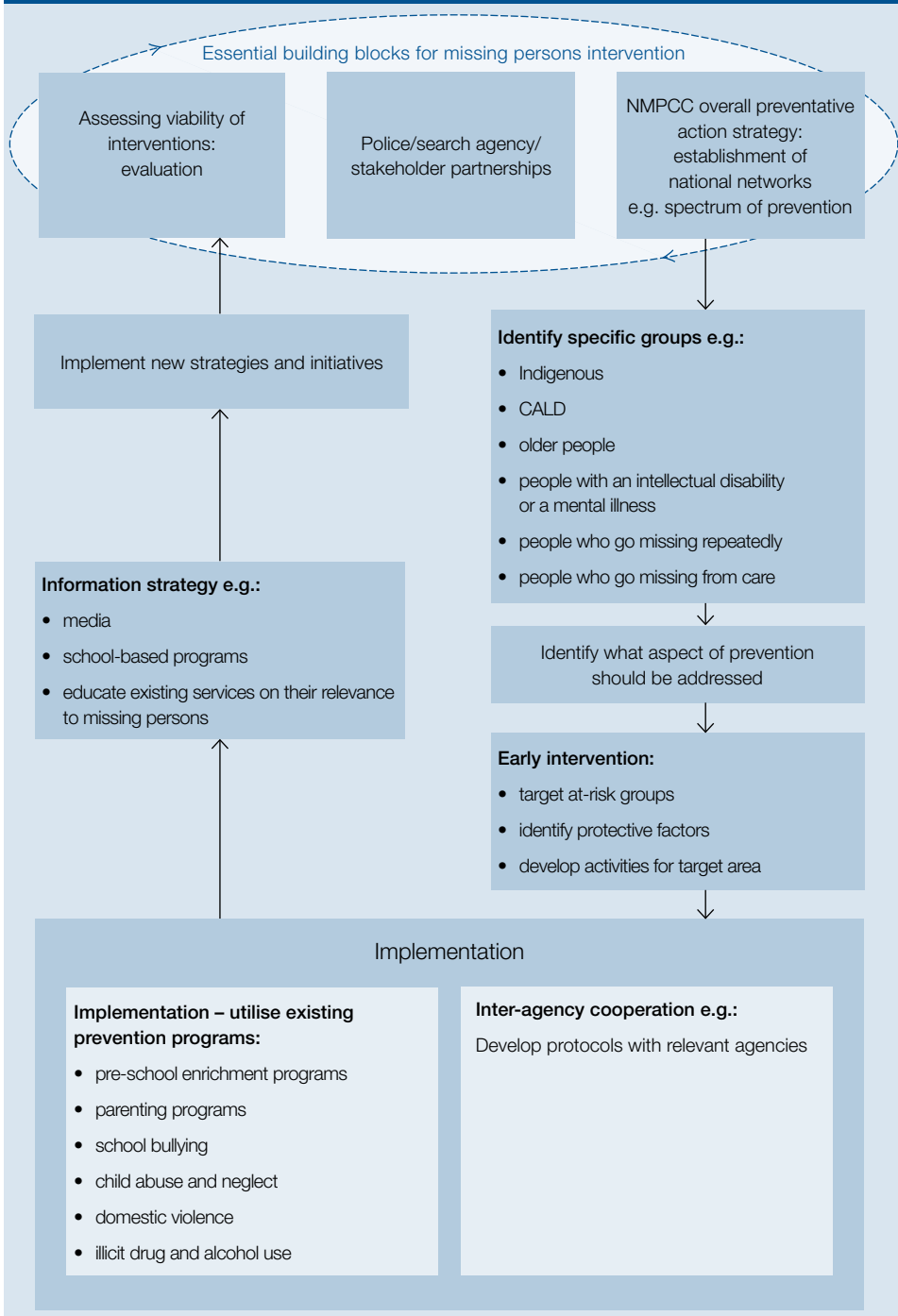
Categorising any proposed missing persons strategy in terms of the spectrum levels could assist stakeholders in the missing persons sector to identify their specific target groups. A prevention framework for missing persons was developed based on the preventative strategies identified in this chapter (see Figure 3). There are three central building blocks:

- overall action strategy
- establishing agency/stakeholder partnerships
- evaluation.

The levels of intervention/prevention that need to be addressed by the stakeholders include:

- information strategy
- identify specific groups at risk of going missing
- target at-risk groups and identify protective factors
- develop protocols with relevant agencies
- utilise existing prevention programs
- coordinate with mental health services
- utilise intervention programs used for suicide prevention.

**Figure 3: Framework for intervention programs and preventative strategies for missing persons**





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## Summary

Until data collection and records of missing persons in Australia improve, it will be difficult to accurately ascertain the key risk factors for people who go missing. Good practice in early intervention and prevention for missing persons needs to be based on programs that address both risk and protective factors. Young people and adults should be considered separately when implementing prevention strategies due to the different risk factors that may influence why they go missing. Risk factors for young people identified in previous research and also in this study, suggested that these could best be addressed through frameworks that have been tailored to developmental crime prevention and early intervention, preventing child abuse and neglect, and preventing youth suicide. For adults, the preventative strategies could be modelled on programs for the prevention of partner conflict and domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health issues. A public health approach to guide overall action could be utilised as a possible framework for preventative strategies for missing persons.

Three common themes appeared to be relevant for the implementation of good practice for preventing people from going missing. First, there is the need for cultural sensitivity; second, the project needs to be adapted to suit both the age and gender of the target population; and third, there should be good inter-agency collaboration among the stakeholders. A prevention framework based on the research findings has been developed incorporating various aspects of the models presented throughout this chapter.

## 6

# The way forward

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The perceived gaps in missing persons service delivery were consistent across the different agencies and individuals consulted. As already detailed, the main areas included:

- response by search agencies (risk assessment, data consistency, training, empathy for families, and better contact with families to keep them updated on developments)
- educating service providers on the concept of missing, including ambiguous loss
- standardised data collection on missing persons
- developing a prevention framework.

Based on these concerns, a plan of action has been developed. Essential to this is a realistic expectation of the length and complexity of the process. The multifaceted nature of responding to these gaps means there is no clear order of what needs to be done first; indeed, many actions should occur concurrently. In summary, the main steps are to:

- implement uniform data collection and reporting procedures across jurisdictions
- implement uniform risk assessment procedures across jurisdictions
- identify, engage and negotiate with agencies about their role with regard to missing persons
- improve service delivery and support for families and friends.

A promising factor in addressing the gaps in the missing persons sector is that most of the foundations are already in place. Even where there is not a strong missing persons agenda, those directly related to missing persons service delivery are committed to promoting change in those areas.

A great deal of the responsibility for sustaining momentum for missing persons service delivery lies with governments in terms of resources and direction. At a national level the NMPCC is clearly the driving agency for coordinating and facilitating an enhanced response. The capacity for the NMPCC to respond and provide leadership at a national level has been enhanced by additional Australian Government funding of \$3.9m over four years to progress a range of initiatives, many of which are articulated in this research. At the state level it is the responsibility of state agencies, in particular the police services, to form and sustain effective partnerships to respond to delegated state responsibilities.

The need for diverse support options and mechanisms was acknowledged in the National Missing Persons Policy, endorsed by the then Australasian Police Ministers' Council in 2006. The policy provides a framework for driving initiatives within the missing persons sector and incorporates the PLEaS policy principles of prevention, location, education and support.

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## Flowchart for addressing the gaps in the missing persons agenda

A summary flowchart has been created to develop a strategy for addressing the main gaps raised in missing persons issues (Figure 4). This flowchart attempts to encompass the main priorities raised in the consultations and surveys documented in previous chapters. Addressing gaps requires the continued dedication of the NMPCC, FFMPU, NSW Families and Friends of Missing Persons Interagency Forum, Missing Persons Committee NSW Inc, National Advisory Committee on Missing Persons, Police Consultative Group on Missing Persons, the police and search agencies. Their priorities and purpose need to be clear if other organisations, departments and the public are to be involved with the missing persons agenda. Based on the consultations, three primary areas exist in the missing persons sector:

- the needs of missing persons and persons at risk of going missing
- the needs of families and friends of missing persons
- the needs of those trying to locate the missing persons.

For missing persons and people at risk of going missing, the priorities are early intervention and appropriate services targeted at prevention, as well as access to services after they have been located. The priority for those left behind (family and friends) is support for searching and counselling, appropriate to each level of need (initial, during and after). As a family member revealed in the *A Glimmer of hope* booklet, hope for the long-term missing merges into three stages: 'hope of reunion, to hope of information, which will finally become hope of resolution' (FFMPU 2005: 26). The search agencies require greater access to information and better reporting standards for missing persons.

The flowchart attempts to document the main points under common themes, as there are some actions that can apply across the three primary areas. For example, training and education about missing persons is required for the police, stakeholders and the public. For simplicity, the boxes are loosely divided into five areas, with each area representing actions that are closely related to one another. The areas are then explained according to these categories.

The following section discusses the points raised in the flowchart in more detail. It is important to remember that the framework is neither exhaustive in its suggestions, nor are the actions mutually exclusive. Addressing one gap may also be beneficial to another area, and regardless of the importance of closing a gap, action depends on available resources. The flowchart is not a rigid document, nor is it expected to address all the suggestions mentioned within the same gap at the same time.

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## Area one: Police missing persons procedures and data collection

### Areas for action

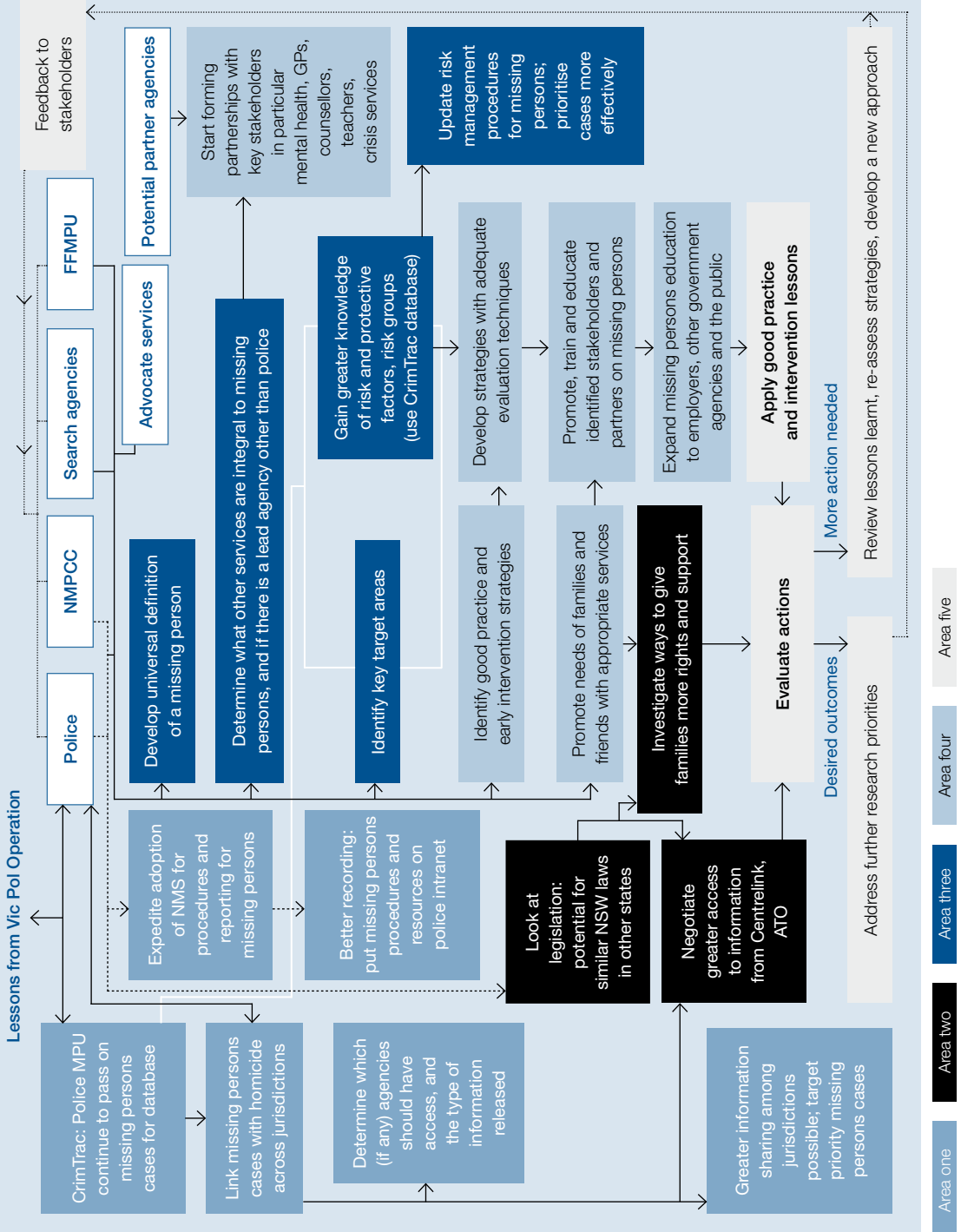
- Implementation of national minimum standards (NMS) for procedures
- Shaping of missing persons procedures and resources
- Continuation of CrimTrac database of missing persons
- Linking unidentified homicide victims to missing persons
- Determine which agencies (if any) should have access to the CrimTrac database, and the type of information released

A fundamental action is to continue with the implementation of NMS for police missing persons reports. This is crucial for a number of reasons. First, there is currently not enough comparable data for analysis across or within jurisdictions. These data are essential to obtain an accurate picture of the characteristics of missing persons, and may assist in providing stronger evidence to identify risk factors and risk groups. Second, the CrimTrac capability has the potential for each police jurisdiction to check and cross-reference cases across Australia. It could also help in linking missing persons cases with unidentified homicide victims.

### *National minimum standards*

Improving the adoption of NMS could be assisted by reviewing police standard operating procedures so they incorporate them. This has proved to be difficult, as NMS have been developed but have not been universally adopted. Some reasons for this may be inferred from the stakeholder consultations. In particular, the large volume of missing persons cases received and the understaffing of missing persons units present difficulties for the enforcement of the NMS, especially among officers in the field. At least three police jurisdictions were about to review or were reviewing the standard operating procedures for missing persons. MPU staff are constantly changing and this, together with the fact that MPUs are generally staffed by lower-ranking officers, may affect the ability to change. NSW police indicated that the new Command Management Framework was advantageous, as it made commanding officers more accountable for the actions of those under their command, and could be a model for other jurisdictions if it works well. There is also a perception that missing persons does not have as high a profile as other areas of policing. All these factors make it difficult to implement NMS across jurisdictions. It is the role of the MPU in each police jurisdiction, facilitated by the NMPCC, to continue to highlight the importance of these standards.

**Figure 4: What needs to be done: a policy approach for addressing gaps in the missing persons agenda**



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A police intranet source with guidelines on procedures to be followed when a person is reported missing could be an option for improving and standardising the police response. It could be possible to trial this in the NSW MPU, so that it can eventually be made available to field officers. If it is successful, it could be adapted for use in other jurisdictions.

### *CrimTrac*

CrimTrac is currently in the process of expanding and refining the CrimTrac Police Reference System (CPRS). The CPRS provides police officers with rapid access to up-to-date, consolidated, nation-wide information that supports their operational activities. The CPRS complements police jurisdictional systems and facilitates nation-wide information sharing. Officers can make decisions equipped with knowledge recorded by their colleagues from across the nation. This is a powerful system that greatly improves an officer's ability and confidence to respond to events and investigate them comprehensively. The information available will depend on the role of the officer and the nature of the enquiry. The current information that would assist officers to determine if a person is known in any jurisdiction includes:

- a threat to police safety
- a threat to themselves or others
- of interest to police
- wanted by police.

Consequently, the CPRS includes information about missing persons, escapees, unidentified persons and unidentified remains. A user of the system can search for these persons of interest using any combination of the following criteria: name, gender, date of birth, age range, suburb and state.

CrimTrac is currently undertaking a missing persons scoping study that will assess the need to enhance the CPRS to consider the current National Criminal Investigation DNA Database and the National Automated Fingerprint Identification System to meet the requirements of Recommendation 5.4 of the Palmer Report. It is anticipated that enhancements to these systems will assist the police in the management of missing persons, unidentified persons/bodies and escapee cases.

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## Area two: Family rights, legislation and access to other agencies' information

### Areas for action

- Introducing legislation across jurisdictions similar to the *NSW Protected Estates Act 1983*
- Identifying ways of accessing information currently prohibited because of legislation and policy constraints
- Negotiation for greater access to information held by agencies other than the police and search agencies
- Well-defined support for families

Area two principally deals with legislation and access to information from agencies other than police and designated missing persons agencies. Many agencies that have information that may be useful to those searching for missing persons are bound by privacy laws, and organisational policies and procedures. Policies can vary within a single organisation. This reform ties in with the needs and rights of families who wish to manage the estate and affairs of missing relatives. It would also help when trying to obtain information from agencies that may be able to assist in locating the missing person.

### Family support and services

The NSW FFMPU has developed services and resources specifically dedicated to families and friends of missing persons. This includes the provision of specialist counselling services as well as information, referral and support services. The FFMPU is also involved in law reform, research, publications and the sharing of information across agencies in the sector. The FFMPU has implemented a range of comprehensive web-based information, produced an e-newsletter and has facilitated roundtables addressing relevant topics concerned with sub-groups within the overall population. The FFMPU also conducts community education and training for both search agencies and other relevant NGOs in the missing persons sector in New South Wales.

The NMPCC is currently developing a national approach to supporting families based on the expertise of the FFMPU, including expansion of services, engagement with stakeholders, counselling practices and integrated service delivery for young people. It is progressing web-based resources for families, particularly those who may be in isolated areas. The website also has the potential to be an important resource for service providers.



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### *Legislation and agency policies*

Legislation and the policies, procedures and guidelines of governments and organisations in each jurisdiction were a concern for those consulted. Commonwealth and state/territory privacy laws were unanimously cited by the police, nongovernment search agencies and other organisations as being the biggest barriers to accessing information. Privacy legislation inhibits the accessing of information from Centrelink, Medicare, banks, the Australian Taxation Office and the Registrars of Births, Deaths and Marriages. Costs of accessing services and the length of time to process information are additional barriers. These issues are related to the argument emerging in Europe, which balances the notion of privacy principles against the rights of people to know they are being sought. Changing legislation or agency procedures regarding privacy would be extremely delicate, and would require a lot of time and debate.

It is unlikely that all these organisations will change internal policies readily, regardless of sympathy they may feel for families. The search agencies NMPCC and related organisations might find it useful to compile information about these in a national database located at the NMPCC, for example, each jurisdiction's Births, Deaths and Marriages charges, and the costs of interpreters. This would serve the following purposes:

- other states and organisations would be aware of barriers and costs of accessing particular services in other states
- it could put into perspective the areas to be the focus of coordinated change
- it could help identify policies or procedures that could be adopted in other areas.

Jurisdictions would find it useful to communicate with each other regarding challenges with existing legislation. It is important to note that some state agencies are apprehensive about formal or national agreements. Some groups consulted indicated that they have good informal connections that work well for them, and formalising agreements with specific boundaries could restrict the amount of information they previously received from grey areas. Another mentioned that they did not want things to change if it jeopardised the access from sister agencies. In other words, it might make information more expensive, or informal agreements could cease if there were pressure to standardise access. Therefore, the merits and lessons of informal arrangements should be seriously debated prior to any standardising action being pursued. However partnerships could yield another benefit: as some agencies can access data where others cannot (for example, some agencies have access to Census data whereas the police do not), joining forces would fill in the gaps.

Missing persons groups should also look at the amended NSW *Protected Estates Act 1983* and the ACT *Guardianship and Management of Property Act 1991* to see if they can be replicated in other Australian jurisdictions ([http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol\\_act/pea1983200/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/pea1983200/)). Those consulted in New South Wales who were familiar with the *Protected*

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*Estates Act 1983* said it lifted some burden from the shoulders of families. In the past, families often went through the traumatic experience of applying for a coronial inquest to declare the person legally dead before they could manage their estate. As one person consulted commented, it ‘keeps the hope alive’, without the finality of having the person declared deceased.

## **Area three: Determining risk and protective factors and at-risk groups, updating procedures and identifying potential partner agencies**

### **Areas for action**

- Development of a clearer definition of a missing person for the police, search agencies and agencies that currently do not consider their services to be related to missing persons
- Determination of which services are integral to missing persons
- Gaining greater knowledge through research into the risk and protective factors and risk groups using the CrimTrac database
- Identification of key target areas
- Updating missing persons procedures, in particular so that missing persons cases can be prioritised more effectively

This area deals with many of the issues that need to be considered prior to prevention action and education. Further clarification on the missing persons risk and protective factors, including risk groups, can help determine what needs to be targeted, with the assistance of which agencies. Updating procedures and policies on missing persons, including how a missing person is defined, would assist police and other agencies prioritise cases.

As mentioned in previous chapters, the definition of a missing person determines the nature and extent of police action. Discussion on this issue could be coordinated by the NMPCC. Whether the police should have the principle role in searching for missing persons when no foul play is suspected is also an issue that needs to be debated. Agencies that this may affect (for example, state community service agencies) would need to be included in the discussion, the results of which may affect procedures, training and education of the police, search agencies, stakeholders and the public. However, as the key consultations acknowledged, it is necessary to have a balance between this discussion and progress to addressing identified risk factors.

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Although it would be ideal to have a more accurate idea of the extent and nature of missing persons in Australia, there is enough literature concurring on the probable risk factors to develop prevention strategies in these areas. Pursuing interventions and actions against particular risk groups and individuals is more problematic. As noted earlier, the target population as well as the ability of services to deliver the defined interventions should be identified. It is also important that risk factors identified for the missing persons population do not stigmatise and label groups (NHMRC 1999). As the consultations revealed, many of those who are at risk of going missing or who are missing, particularly those from CALD backgrounds or suffering mental health problems, already suffer from stigma. As a worker in the area commented, there can be a 'double loading' of stigma – from within the individual's community and from the mainstream community's perceptions of mental illness.

Currently there is a lack of research into why people go missing. A psychological autopsy, similar to that developed when someone has suicided, could be investigated for its viability with located missing persons. The Australian Institute of Suicide Research and Prevention at Griffith University conducts psychological autopsies in Australia, and would be a worthwhile organisation to contact.

Prioritising missing persons cases is extremely important. Improving mechanisms to identify those who are most vulnerable would help streamline searching priorities. The following criteria are crucial to determine the priority assigned to missing persons cases:

- evidence base – the collection of consistently recorded data across all jurisdictions
- data consistency would allow for rigorous analysis to determine the characteristics of people who go missing
- risk assessment criteria – to assess priority of the investigation
- need to assess whether the fact that the person has gone missing is consistent with their normal behavioural patterns (Simons & Willie 2000).

Engaging in partnerships with agencies who currently do not consider their services to be relevant to missing persons is important for addressing the risk and protective factors, and to negotiate greater access to their data. A national list of such organisations and their services should be compiled to create an information base, similar to the one proposed by WHO for mental health services. WHO recommends performing a mixed economy matrix for mental health services to determine who and how an organisation services a sector in the community and their resources (WHO 2000). This may have to be modified to suit time and budget constraints, but could be adapted to identify related missing persons agencies.

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## Area four: Identifying good practice, implementing strategies and educating police, stakeholders and the public about missing persons

### Areas for action

- Identification of good practice and early intervention strategies
- Partnerships between key stakeholders
- Implementation of strategies with performance indicators and evaluation techniques
- Promotion and education of identified stakeholders
- Expansion of agency awareness of their relevance for missing persons, as well as public awareness about missing persons

Area four deals primarily with establishing partnerships with previously identified stakeholders, with the aim of implementing good practice and early intervention strategies. For this to occur, the agencies that do not currently consider their services as being related to missing persons will need to be educated and resourced on their role. Once these agencies have greater knowledge of missing persons and how to deal with the issues, they can play an important role in helping educate the public. Training needs to occur for the police and stakeholders, especially if myths and attitudes regarding missing persons are to change. It is important that any strategy proposed should be piloted to test its effectiveness, with indicators of success and evaluation built into its structure. The National Training and Education Project Officer recruited by the NMPCC is responsible for the implementation of programs to engage with those stakeholders that do not currently consider their services related to missing persons.

### *Training for police*

The introduction of specific missing persons training could address the gaps identified in police service delivery. The consultations revealed that police most needed training for:

- NMS
- report writing and documentation
- improving attitudes towards families reporting someone missing, and encouraging empathy
- giving families updates on investigations
- dispelling myths (for example, a person must be missing for at least 24 hours prior to making a report)
- updating standard operating procedures on missing persons.

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These could not be addressed in the one session, and each area has different challenges. For example, training on missing persons is currently conducted at police training institutions, yet police agreed that what is learnt there is often forgotten after cramming for final exams. Junior officers tend to learn 'on the job' from more senior officers and often forget what was taught. The practices and attitudes of the senior officer may not reflect the current practices of the police. Any training on missing persons must recognise that this process of learning in the police service needs to be for all ranks.

One of the most crucial aspects for families and friends was the attitude of the police officer when a person is first reported missing, as this often sets the scene for the subsequent investigation. Police conceded that many officers in local stations do not know how to handle a missing persons report and often treat cases as just another young missing person who may return home soon. The question is how to train police to distinguish high-priority missing persons reports from others.

One police officer suggested training be carried out at the actual station, not just at the Academy. The search agencies, the NMPCC, the FFMPU and the MPU in each police jurisdiction could work collaboratively to develop a training module. Mental health, aged care and youth service agencies should be involved in consultations to advise on the best way to handle those found.

### *Addressing risk and protective factors, and at-risk groups: engaging potential partners*

A significant challenge will be to engage agencies that do not currently see their services being related to missing persons issues: first, education on the connection between their agency and missing persons issues; second, liaising with them as partners to address risk factors and issues in their field; and third, educating them on missing person-specific issues. There are, however, significant funding issues involved in the implementation of these approaches.

The risk and protective factors contributing to missing persons issues are so broad that it is unlikely that real change would take place without collaborating with organisations dealing with the major identified risks. General practitioners, counsellors and community services dealing with young people, CALD organisations, youth and general outreach services, and mental health services would be a priority, particularly those addressing Alzheimer's disease, dementia, depression and suicide. Other potential partners include housing authorities, government departments (for example, Centrelink), refuges and transport companies (for example, taxis, bus companies and airlines).

Creating a partnership between these agencies and the specific missing persons agencies, including police, will take time. As the consultations revealed, many refuges and outreach

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services are reluctant to share information with police, especially if it may jeopardise the rapport an outreach worker has built up with a client. However, the FVIP (ACT Department of Justice and Community Safety & Keys Young 2000) is a positive Australian example of a framework where police and other agencies have worked to achieve a common goal (see Box 15). Other examples are the NSW Police Force and NSW Department of Community Services Joint Investigation Response Team model for the investigation of issues associated with child protection and the Safe at Home Program in Tasmania. There are many examples in Australia and overseas on creating effective partnerships (see AICrime Prevention Matters at <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/crm/>) and on how to minimise tensions between members (see <http://www.preventioninstitute.org/>; Fleming 2006).

When partnerships develop, ways of bridging gaps between the practices and philosophies of different agencies will become apparent. Good practice would be shared among areas, and issues raised within the consultations would start to be addressed. Particular areas raised included:

- most families would rather have practical help in the first instance of searching for missing persons, so developing searching assistance resources should be pursued
- assistance for siblings
- counselling services to be made available for missing persons and their families during the time the person is missing, after the person is located and also for circumstances when reunion is not possible
- post-reunion counselling
- educate general practitioners, counsellors and health professionals on missing persons, particularly unresolved loss
- make the public aware that going missing can happen to anyone, regardless of status
- assistance for those from a CALD background.

Prior to action and projects being implemented, there needs to be an acknowledgement that there are numerous barriers that will most likely hinder the effectiveness of actions, and/or the time it takes to implement them.

### *Educating stakeholders and the public on missing persons issues*

To educate a broad audience on the issue of missing persons, a media and marketing campaign has been developed by the NMPCC to provide information to a targeted audience. To further build on the current campaign strategy it could be developed within a social marketing model, as has been developed for the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. For the model, Carroll (2000) suggested a 12-step model for comprehensive social marketing campaign development. The 12 steps are:

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- problem analysis – the nature and extent of the problem
  - external environment analysis – identify key stakeholders
  - internal environment analysis – determine the resources available and how they can be used to achieve the desired outcome
  - identification of the need for communication and education activity, and audit of complementary health promotion strategies – see how a communication strategy can best be used to promote the strategy, and look at other health promotion strategies, assessing how they can be integrated into the proposed communication strategy
  - audience identification and analysis – determine the most appropriate targets for the activity
  - channel analysis – analyse the options available for reaching the target audience
  - strategic planning for communication and education activity – define specific objectives around the targeted problem within an appropriate theoretical framework, and apply lessons learnt from previous experience
  - formulation of marketing plan and integrated management system
  - development of creative strategies and materials through formative research
  - implementation of strategies and process monitoring
  - pilot evaluation of the strategy and activity
  - review and analysis of the problem and environment for subsequent phases of an activity (Carroll 2000).

## Area five: Looking further ahead

### Areas for action

- The application of good practice and intervention lessons
- Evaluation
- Feedback to lead agencies, particularly the NMPCC, for development of more effective actions
- Research

Area five primarily deals with applying the actions to address the gaps, using good practice models, including proper evaluation and feedback. This is essential to assist the key stakeholders, particularly the NMPCC, to determine whether interventions and actions were successful. Once success has been determined, other research areas could start to be addressed.

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## *Evaluation*

Any intervention or prevention project needs to be evaluated to determine whether it is working and if there are areas in which it can improve. Evaluation needs to be developed early in the process in line with any intervention or prevention program. Evaluation is one of the most important aspects of any project or intervention, particularly if the project relies on external funding or support. While not mentioned specifically in the flowchart, it is assumed that an effective evaluation mechanism will be built into a project's structure and budget.

Dedel's (2006) research measured the effectiveness of strategies directed at missing persons. The problem of young people who run away is often unlike other areas of policing because the behaviour may indicate complex family problems. Making a measurable impact on these underlying causes will require interventions that go far beyond those implemented by police. Police responses are unlikely to impact on the underlying causes and instead are likely to focus on mitigating the harm that comes to, or is caused by, young people who go missing while they are absent from home or care. Police are also likely to seek to shift responsibility for addressing the problem to social service agencies that are better equipped to offer such assistance (Dedel 2006).

Dedel's research illustrates how an effective evaluation can strengthen an intervention. The following outcome measures assess the effectiveness of responses to young people who have run away from home or substitute care:

- reduced number of young people who run away from home or care
- reduced number of repeat runaway episodes reported by parents or caregivers
- increased number of runaways staying in safe locations (for example, home of a friend or relative)
- reduced number of runaways staying in dangerous locations (for example, streets or abandoned buildings)
- increased number of runaways accessing crisis services designed to reduce the harms associated with living on the street (for example, shelters)
- decreased number of runaways who report being victimised while absent from home
- decreased number of runaways involved in criminal activity while absent from home
- decreased number of runaways admitted to secure detention facilities
- increased number of young people successfully reunited with parents, caretakers or placed in safe alternative living arrangements.

The following process measures identify the extent to which selected responses have been implemented as designed:

- increased number of families who have participated in support or mediation to prevent runaway episodes



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- increased number of young people using hotlines and other counselling resources instead of running away
  - reduced number of runaway episodes reported to police by parents or caretakers (increased reports may be a positive indicator initially if parents have been reluctant to report episodes in which their children are at risk of harm)
  - decreased number of inappropriate missing persons reports from foster care homes or group homes
  - reduced number of police hours spent processing or transporting runaways once they are located
  - increased number of young people who receive follow-up services after they return from a runaway episode.

## Research

To date in Australia there have been three major studies into missing persons. The first, which was commissioned by the AIC and included young missing persons and adult missing persons, analysed data provided by each state and territory police agency, as well as information obtained from police annual reports (Swanton et al. 1988). This process was limited because police databases could only provide data on age, gender and number of individuals reported missing, as opposed to number of reports. The strength of this research is that it placed missing persons on the research and policy agenda, and highlighted the extent of the problem. Distinctions between persons missing from home and persons missing from selected institutions could also be identified. In 1998, the National Missing Persons Unit (now the NMPCC) commissioned another landmark study that included data on young missing persons and adult missing persons (Henderson & Henderson 1998). Jurisdictional differences in the information recorded by police on missing persons meant that they too were also only able to compile national statistics on the age and sex of missing persons. However, they were able to identify other significant characteristics and circumstances of the missing persons population based on a one-week sample of missing persons reports to police and a survey of families and friends of missing persons. The main objective of this research was to explore the economic impact of missing persons on the Australian community. As described previously in this report, in 2004 a report commissioned by the FFMPU examined the circumstances surrounding young Aboriginal females who go missing.

Other significant research commissioned by the FFMPU includes a report on good practice in counselling models for families and friends of missing persons (Hunter Institute of Mental Health 2001), an emotional resource for the families and friends of missing persons (Mental Health Association NSW 2003), and individual studies (Jacques 2002; Wayland 2006).

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## Priorities

The most important factor required to underpin future research into missing persons is the availability of consistent, uniform data from all police jurisdictions, as well as from nongovernment search agencies. The lack of detailed missing persons statistics precludes opportunities for identifying risk factors for people who go missing. Knowledge of these risk factors is crucial for the formulation of effective risk assessment procedures and for tailoring preventative programs for specific categories of missing persons, as well as identifying appropriate counselling/support services.

### Young people

Young people have received the most attention in research in the United Kingdom and the United States, probably because they constitute at least half of the missing persons population. Preventative and early intervention strategies would be most effective for this section of the missing persons population. Research needs to focus on the characteristics of different categories of young people who go missing, together with any pressures or problems they may experience that contribute to them going missing. While this research has identified potential risk factors for young people, young people in care and young people who go missing repeatedly, both the categories and the risk factors need to be further refined. For instance, there are obvious differences in responses and intervention strategies between a young girl who goes missing because she has been subjected to child sexual abuse, and a teenage boy who runs away because of perceived excessive discipline. Further research on young people should include:

- the identification of more detailed risk factors for each category of young missing persons, with particular emphasis on young persons who go missing repeatedly
- the characteristics of people/families who report young persons who go missing
- determination of whether going missing occurs more frequently in particular families and whether there is an inter-generational pattern of going missing.

### Adults

The adult missing persons population has been under-researched in Australia and overseas. Many adult absences may be intentional. Opportunities for preventative strategies are substantially less than the young missing persons population. The two exceptions to this are adults who leave unintentionally as a result of mental health problems, and a subset of older adults who have gone missing as a result of Alzheimer's' disease or dementia. Long-term missing persons are more likely to be adults. This is an area that requires immediate attention, as having a long-term missing relative or friend can cause considerable distress to those involved. Research on adult missing persons should include:

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- identification of more detailed risk factors for adults who may go missing intentionally or unintentionally
  - identification of more detailed risk factors for long-term missing persons and the characteristics of the circumstances in which they left
  - identification of strategies to prevent people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia from going missing.

## **Culturally and linguistically diverse people**

This research has identified that mental health problems and associated stigma from their own communities could be the catalyst for CALD people to go missing. They often face a double loading of stigma from their own community and the broader Australian community. As a result, isolation often becomes a significant issue. Research on CALD people should include:

- identification of more detailed risk factors
- identification of more effective support services
- identification of more effective support services for the families and friends after their family member or friend has gone missing
- identification of more effective support services for CALD missing persons themselves after they have decided to leave.

## **People with an intellectual disability**

There is little research that provides information about the level of risk for people with an intellectual disability to go missing. Several key stakeholders stressed that intellectual disability should be considered an important risk factor. As a result, future research should focus on:

- identification of more detailed risk factors for people with an intellectual disability who may go missing
- identification of strategies to prevent people with an intellectual disability from going missing.

## **Indigenous people**

Very little is known about Indigenous missing persons, although Australian research has given some insight into why young Indigenous girls go missing. Research in this area needs to include:

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- young Indigenous people in care who go missing either once or repeatedly and how this can be prevented, the types of agencies that should be involved, as well as the role of the police
  - identification of risk factors for adult Indigenous people who go missing
  - examination of the role of Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation and how support and advocacy services for at-risk Indigenous young people can be expanded.

## **Mental health**

Mental health has emerged as a consistent theme in all aspects of this research. While it can be a reason for young people to go missing, it appears that mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety, are more associated with the adult missing persons population. Research in this area needs to focus on:

- identification of risk factors for people with mental health issues who go missing
- identification of effective support services for people who go missing with mental health problems, and how agencies can better network with each other.

## **Police**

The volume of missing persons reports presented to police each day provides difficulties in correctly assessing and prioritising investigations. The challenge is to identify those that require a more urgent and intensive response. The initial assessment by the officer in charge of the investigation is critical to the outcome. Issues surrounding families and friends of missing persons and their expectations of the police response are also important. Research involving missing persons and the police should focus on the following:

- development of uniform risk assessment procedures and guidelines across all police jurisdictions in Australia
- development of protocols between police and other agencies. In particular, these protocols need to define the role of the police in investigations, so that unrealistic expectations are not placed on them. Police need to be aware of the sensitivities required when dealing with families and friends of missing persons
- sample local police and their perceptions of the processes involved when a person is reported missing
- identification of training requirements and applicability for police officers involved in missing persons investigations.

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## Support and counselling services

Support and counselling services are very important for the families and friends of missing persons, as well as for the missing persons themselves. Needs may change at various stages of the missing person investigation. The FFMPU is a model of good practice for support and counselling services. Research should:

- investigate the feasibility of replicating the broader services provided by the FFMPU in other jurisdictions
- continue support from government and nongovernment agencies to implement the national approach to supporting families currently being developed by the NMPCC.

## Inter-agency collaboration

All agencies involved in service provision for missing persons should be working together so that the most cost-effective and efficient investigations, as well as appropriate support services, are maintained. While it is recognised that there are challenges to inter-agency cooperation, research in this area should focus on:

- identification/development of good practice models
- evaluation of intervention and preventative programs.

## Summary

This plan of action is offered as a guide to pursuing the most prevalent gaps raised by those consulted during the research. Action should be dictated by thorough consultation with relevant agencies, evidence-based interventions and practices, strong partnerships, clear direction, and well-timed implementation. Anticipating potential barriers for change could help minimise implementation problems, and allow the development of alternative pathways to achieve success.

It was beyond the scope of this report to document every action needed for every risk area, and the available frameworks to achieve this. A framework was presented that may be useful for developing an enhanced whole-of-government and community response to missing persons service delivery.

## 7 Conclusion

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The diversity of the missing persons population presents a challenge in terms of the nature of the search, the type of support required by the families and friends of missing persons, and ultimately the support required by the missing persons themselves when they are located. Data quality is a significant issue that seriously compromises any attempt to estimate the exact number of missing persons and to build an evidence base about risk factors and characteristics of missing persons. As well as inconsistency in definitions of key variables across jurisdictions and jurisdictional differences in data entry processes, there are no unique identifiers within datasets and no linkages between datasets across jurisdictions.

The main agency for searching for missing persons is the police. Each police jurisdiction has its own MPU or equivalent with separate guidelines, procedures and practices. However, the implementation of these policies has not always been consistent within jurisdictions and has certainly not been consistent across jurisdictions. The volume of missing persons reports also presents a challenge to the police in terms of risk assessment and the prioritisation of individual cases.

Questions have been raised about the role and purpose of police in the investigation of missing persons. It may well be that the police are not the best agency for non-suspicious missing persons investigations, for instance people who go missing from juvenile care and mental health institutions. If the police did not have responsibility for these types of missing persons incidents, they could concentrate on other intricate and urgent high-risk investigations. This raises the question of which agencies are best placed to act as parallel search/investigation agencies in the missing persons sector. The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation play a particularly important role. An equally important, but international, role is played by the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and ISS. DFAT works closely with the AFP and Interpol to help trace Australian people reported missing overseas.

While the police and nongovernment agencies have their own approaches to missing persons, a crucial question is whether NGOs and certain government departments could play a greater role in the search for missing persons. Agencies with a duty of care for young people who go missing when in out-of-home care need to examine existing child protection legislation and inter-agency guidelines with a view to ensuring that responsibility for the welfare of the young people when in their care and should they go missing is clearly delineated.

The NMPCC is in a unique position with the police and NGOs. As the peak national organisation, and through its existing structures, it is well placed to continue to provide a leadership role in an effective and coordinated response to the issue of missing persons within Australia.

The need for effective support services for families and friends of missing persons, and for the missing persons themselves when they are located, has been highlighted in this

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research. Support is defined in different ways. Some need practical search assistance, information and advice, while others need practical support for managing their day-to-day affairs. Some need professional counselling when their family member or friend first goes missing, while others need support at other stages of the investigation. The reunion between missing persons and their families can require specialised counselling services. These services often already exist in other areas of individual or family support, and include counselling services and interventions for family violence, child abuse and neglect, illicit drug and alcohol abuse, and mental health.

The FFMPU in New South Wales is the only designated service in Australia involved in counselling and support services for missing persons. Its purpose is to coordinate support services within New South Wales for the families and friends of missing persons. The FFMPU also works closely with the police and nongovernment search agencies. It could be considered as a model for the implementation of counselling and support services for families and friends of missing persons Australia-wide. The NMPCC, in consultation with the FFMPU, is currently developing a national approach to supporting families across Australia based on the expertise developed within the FFMPU. A challenge for the development of this national approach, however, is obtaining a clear picture of the overall service delivery requirements for this sector as data on referrals are not available.

Good practice in early intervention and prevention for missing persons need to be based on programs that address the risk and protective factors surrounding why people go missing. The lack of consistent and rigorous data collected from police and the nongovernment sector limits the extent to which this report can recommend practices to reduce the incidence of missing persons or improve service delivery. The most relevant prevention frameworks that appear to apply to young people who go missing include developmental crime prevention and early intervention; preventing child abuse and neglect, and family violence; and preventing youth suicide. Prevention strategies based on mental health, family and domestic violence, substance abuse and suicide prevention could be used in strategies to prevent adults going missing, particularly vulnerable groups such as older, CALD and Indigenous people.

Effective coordination between government and nongovernment agencies is an important factor in investigations and the provision of support and counselling services. Joint protocols can provide valuable clarification of the responsibilities of agencies involved with missing persons, and a process through which to transfer information. These agencies can include the police, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, child protection and family violence services, as well as nongovernment search agencies. In the case of young people who run away from care in particular, protocols would offer clear guidance on how best to respond to unauthorised absences from care, which in turn would ensure an appropriate coordinated response based on a robust framework that would best ensure the safety of the child.



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Privacy issues can present a significant barrier to investigations/searches for missing persons. Privacy legislation at both Commonwealth and state/territory level, as well as organisational impediments, can present an important barrier to the sharing and accessing of information that may enable missing persons to be found more quickly or at all. Privacy legislation was identified by the police, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and the families and friends of missing persons as a major barrier to accessing timely relevant information from services such as banks, Centrelink, Medicare and the Australian Taxation Office.

## The way forward

This research has developed a summary flowchart to identify the steps that need to be taken to address the gaps in the missing persons agenda. These have been grouped into five areas of action. The first involves police missing persons procedures and data collection, and includes the:

- implementation of NMS for procedures
- shaping of missing persons procedures and resources
- continuation of the CrimTrac database on missing persons
- linking unidentified homicide victims to missing persons
- determine which agencies (if any) should have access to the CrimTrac database and the type of information to be released.

The second involves family rights, legislation and access to other agencies' information, and includes:

- introducing legislation across jurisdictions similar to the NSW *Protected Estates Act 1983*
- possible ways of accessing information that is currently prohibited because of legislation and privacy constraints
- negotiation for access to information held by agencies other than police and nongovernment search agencies
- well-defined and implemented support for families.

The third involves the determination of risk and protective factors and at-risk groups, updating procedures and identifying potential partner agencies, and includes:

- the development of a clearer definition of a missing person for the police, nongovernment search agencies and agencies that currently do not consider their services to be related to missing persons

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- the determination of which services are integral to missing persons
  - using the CrimTrac database to improve knowledge of the risk and protective factors and risk groups
  - identification of key target areas
  - updating missing persons procedures, in particular to prioritise missing persons cases more effectively.

The fourth includes identifying good practice, implementing strategies and educating police, stakeholders and the public on missing persons, and includes:

- identification of good practice and early intervention strategies
- partnerships among key stakeholders
- implementation of strategies with adequate indicators and evaluation techniques
- promotion and education of identified stakeholders in missing persons
- expansion of agencies' awareness of their relevance for missing persons, as well as public awareness of missing persons.

The fifth, looking ahead, includes:

- the application of good practice and intervention models
- evaluation
- feedback to lead agencies, particularly the NMPCC, for development of more effective actions.

The NMPCC has endorsed a national and coordinated approach based on four key principles – prevention, location, education and support (PLEaS) – and is in a position to provide leadership and facilitate an enhanced response across all aspects of missing persons searches, investigations, counselling and support services, as well as educating the public in relation to missing persons to minimise the incidence.

## Priorities

### Young people

- The identification of more detailed risk factors for each category of young missing persons, with particular emphasis on young people who go missing repeatedly
- The characteristics of people/families who report young people who go missing
- Determination of whether going missing occurs more frequently in particular families and whether there is an inter-generational pattern of going missing

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- The development of preventative and intervention strategies for all categories of missing young persons

## **Adults**

- Identification of more detailed risk factors for adults who may go missing, intentionally or unintentionally
- Identification of more detailed risk factors for long-term missing persons and the characteristics of the circumstances in which they left
- Identification of strategies to prevent people with Alzheimer's disease and dementia from going missing

## **Culturally and linguistically diverse people**

- Identification of more detailed risk factors as to why CALD people go missing
- Identification of more effective support services to prevent CALD people going missing
- Identification of more effective support services for the families and friends of CALD people after their family member or friend has gone missing
- Identification of more effective support services for CALD missing persons themselves after they have decided to leave

## **People with an intellectual disability**

- Identification of more detailed risk factors for people with an intellectual disability who may go missing
- Identification of strategies to prevent people with an intellectual disability from going missing

## **Indigenous people**

- Young Indigenous people in care who go missing either once or repeatedly and how this can be prevented, the types of agencies that should be involved, as well as the role of the police
- Identification of risk factors for adult Indigenous people who go missing
- Examination of the role of Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation, particularly how support and advocacy for at-risk Indigenous young people can be expanded

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## Mental health

- Identification of risk factors for people with mental health problems who go missing
- Identification of effective support services for people with mental health problems who go missing, and how the agencies concerned can work collaboratively

## Police

- Development of uniform risk assessment procedures and guidelines across all police jurisdictions in Australia
- Development of protocols between police and other agencies, particularly to define the role of the police in missing persons investigations so that unrealistic expectations are not placed on them. Police need to be aware of the sensitivities required when dealing with families and friends of missing persons
- Sample local police and their perceptions of the processes involved when a person is reported missing
- Identification of training requirements and applicability for police officers involved in missing persons investigations

## Support and counselling services

- Investigate the feasibility of replicating the broader services provided by the FFMPU in other jurisdictions in Australia
- Support from government and nongovernment agencies to implement the national approach to supporting families currently being developed by the NMPCC

## Inter-agency collaboration

- Identification/development of good practice models for inter-agency collaboration
- Evaluation of intervention and preventative programs

A great deal of progress has been made in the missing persons sector since the publication of the landmark report by Henderson and Henderson in 1998, particularly the establishment of the NMPCC (previously known as the National Missing Persons Unit) with significantly increased Government funding to progress a range of initiatives to provide a comprehensive and coordinated approach to the Australian Government's response to missing persons. Another important factor has been the establishment of the FFMPU in New South Wales. In the past, there has been insufficient review, training, supervision and resources allocated to MPUs in most police jurisdictions. It appears that this situation is now changing with more

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prominence being given to missing persons investigations in all Australian jurisdictions. The important role of NGOs in searching and counselling services appears to be increasingly recognised. With the allocation of extra resources, their contribution could be expanded.

While the nature of the missing persons sector is ambiguous, a clear national leadership role taken by the NMPCC in the coordination of missing persons service delivery will ensure that the significant achievements that have already occurred in the last few years will continue to gain momentum. This would be reflected in the investigation and searches for missing persons, support and counselling services, education and early intervention, and preventative strategies. It would also ensure that Australia could play a clear leadership role in the international approach to missing persons.

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## Appendixes

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

This project was approved by the AIC Research Ethics Committee, with advice and support provided by the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee consisted of representatives from the NMPCC, FFMPU, The Salvation Army, an academic from the University of Tasmania and a family member. Two main meetings were held with the Steering Committee, one at the outset of the project and the other on completion of the draft report. A progress report was provided mid-way through the project and individual members of the committee provided direct assistance at various stages on elements of the research. The methodology included the following.

### Literature search

A literature search was undertaken using the resources of the JV Barry Library at the AIC and from CINCH, the Australian criminology database, and other online databases such as the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, for international literature. The purpose of the review was to examine previous research about missing persons both in Australia and internationally. The literature review covered the demographic and social context of missing persons, risk factors for persons going missing, good practice models for service delivery, good practice models for early intervention programs and preventative strategies, and policy procedures for missing persons.

Terms including 'missing persons', 'missing children', 'runaways' and 'missing persons investigations' were used to search the internet and specific databases such as Informit and ProQuest. The missing persons literature revealed that there was no available research on preventing people going missing or good practice models for service delivery. As such, it was necessary to extend the literature search beyond missing persons specifically to include risk factors for missing persons and the associated literature. These areas included mental health, age (both older people and young people), child abuse and family violence. Suicide prevention models were also examined, as many of the risk factors are similar to the reasons for people going missing.

### Data requests

A specific aim of the research was to update existing data on missing persons from all police jurisdictions, as well as from NGOs such as The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing and Refugee Services, the ISS and the Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation. The initial part of this process included writing to all of the police jurisdictions and to the main offices of the NGOs to determine the extent and type of data held and how much of this data was accessible for the research. The initial request

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included data for the period 1 July 1998 until 30 June 2006. A data checklist form was included in this request. This included:

- how missing persons reports are kept (for example, databases such as Excel or Access, or hardcopy)
- quality of unit record data
- variables available (for example, sex, age, nationality, Indigenous status, ethnicity, missing from own residence, mental institution, probable cause, length of time missing, prior history of going missing, drug and alcohol use, and any history of mental illness)
- Appendix 2 shows the data that were reported to be held by the police jurisdictions, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing and Refugee Services and the ISS. The ISS reported that their records were on hardcopy only. To assist the police and the NGOs in providing the information, a template was made available outlining the type of information to be retrieved. A request was also made for unit record data. When the template was sent, all police jurisdictions and the NGOs contacted the AIC to say that it would be impossible to supply data for such a long period of time. As a result of this the data period requested was refined to 1 July 2005 to 30 June 2006. No organisations were able to complete the template even for the one-year period. Various degrees of information were forwarded and these are outlined in detail at Appendix 2. The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service was able to provide minimal data for the period 2005–06, which included the number of missing persons only. The Australian Red Cross Tracing Service could only provide information already published in their annual reports for privacy reasons. This also only included minimal data. The ISS and Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation were not able to provide any data.
- The Queensland Police Service was not able to provide any data at the present time as they are currently upgrading their missing persons database to a fully computerised system on missing persons, so statistics are not able to be verified or released.

Databases are kept by The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service. However in a similar manner as the police, it is difficult to obtain information from these databases and not possible to obtain unit record data. Hardcopies of each missing person incident are held in each state and territory office for two years after closing the file. Records are kept on sex, age, nationality, ethnicity and length of time missing. The Australian Red Cross Tracing Service could only provide data from their annual report.



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## Online questionnaire

An online questionnaire (at Appendix 4) was designed with the aim of identifying:

- the characteristics of people who go missing
- early intervention initiatives that may prevent people going missing
- relevant counselling/support services
- gaps/barriers in service delivery.

The online questionnaire was chosen as the survey tool because it was cost-effective, accessible and allowed respondents to skip to the relevant questions easily. It also collated results automatically in a database, thus significantly reducing data input time during analysis. There were some limitations to using this method. These included the inability to save and return to responses at a later time, and the possibility that some servers used by survey participants could not support the function. However, due to time constraints and limited financial resources, this method was considered the most appropriate for the research.

The survey was sent to all members of the Steering Committee for comment. With the agreement of the Steering Committee, three groups were targeted in the survey: nongovernment search agencies; police; and agencies that provided counselling services and support for all people associated with missing persons. For all three groups, the NMPCC national stakeholder contact list was used as the primary method for identifying participants in the survey.

A targeted strategy to distribute this survey was developed. Core agencies such as the MPUs in all police jurisdictions as well as The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service were initially identified to complete the survey. Other agencies that offered health and counselling services or those involved with missing persons and their families were also contacted and invited to participate in the survey. Using only the NMPCC list of stakeholders was not a valid option, as many agencies that deal with risk factors related to missing persons, such as some welfare agencies and mental health facilities, were not on the current list of stakeholders provided. As there are several different agencies involved with various aspects of the missing persons sector, a snowball sampling technique was used. The internet was used to identify many of the agencies.

There were limitations in using this technique. By utilising both the NMPCC stakeholder list and targeting agencies relating to missing persons service delivery, the sample was not random. Due to time constraints it was also not possible to spend more time searching for related agencies across Australia. However, by sending survey invitations to all branches of a national agency, every effort was made to make sure there was representation of agencies across all identified areas. Targeting only police in the MPUs was also problematic for

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numerous reasons. Staff at the MPU in each police jurisdiction change and many people on the stakeholder list no longer worked there. Broadening the survey to operational police in every local area command in Australia was not feasible.

Overall, 158 individuals and/or agencies were sent an invitation to complete a survey. Out of the surveys sent, 18 were deemed undeliverable. Eighty-four surveys were sent to stakeholders that were on the NMPCC contact list, and 74 were sent to agencies identified in the research. Forty-three police contacts were sent surveys, including six generic missing persons mailboxes. Of the 47, six police responded. Four agencies that traced persons were sent surveys, and three responded.

The survey was to run for three weeks. Initial survey distribution began on 17 October 2006. Over the next few days, more potential survey participants were located through extensive internet searches. On the deadline of 6 November 2006, there were insufficient survey responses. A follow-up email was sent on 13 November 2006, indicating that the extended survey deadline was now moved back to 15 December 2006. After this, 11 more responses were received. Services were also contacted by telephone to request their participation in the survey.

Thirty-one responses were received for the online questionnaire, but only 28 could be included in the final analysis. One response was a duplication and the other two were incomplete. The small number of responses was most likely due to the fact that few services considered missing persons and their families and friends as a specific client group.

## **Consultations with key stakeholders**

Consultations with key stakeholders were held during the course of the project. Face-to-face interviews were held with the police, nongovernment search agencies and organisations that provided counselling services and support for all people associated with missing persons. Interviews were also held with government departments. These interviews were conducted in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania. A list of key stakeholders interviewed is at Appendix 6.

When determining what agencies in these states should be interviewed, the NMPCC stakeholder list was the primary resource. For all states excluding Tasmania, each organisation cited in the stakeholder listed was contacted for an interview. Due to time and budget constraints, the researchers were limited to only spending one to two days in each location for the project.

A national roundtable discussion was held at the AIC on 12 December 2006. Participants included representatives from the NMPCC, FFMPU, AFP, CrimTrac, WA Police, Victoria Police, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and

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Link-Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation. Life Change Management, academics from Charles Sturt University, Sydney University and Griffith University, and members of the Steering Committee. This lasted a day, and future research priorities were agreed at this meeting.

### **Family members questionnaire**

At the request of the Steering Committee, the AIC agreed to conduct a survey of families of missing persons who were willing to participate. A questionnaire was distributed to the families and friends of missing persons who had indicated that they would like to participate in the research (at Appendix 5). This survey included questions relating to the police response and subsequent investigation, as well as the types of support/counselling services provided/needed. Four surveys were completed. The contact details for the family and friends who indicated that they would like to participate in the survey were supplied by the NMPCC. Seven families were contacted altogether.

## Appendix 2: Police data

Table A1 outlines the data reported to be held by all police jurisdictions, while Tables A2–A8 outline the information that was able to be made available.

**Table A1: Data on missing persons reported to be held by police**

	Gender	Age	Nationality	Indigenous	Ethnicity	Missing from	Probable cause	Length of time	Prior history	Drug/alcohol	Mental illness	Database
ACT	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Promis/Excel
NT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Promis
NSW	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	COPS
Qld	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
SA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	PIMS/Excel
Tas	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Access
Vic	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	LEAP
WA	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	n.a.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Access

Gender	Male/female
Age	Age when reported missing
Nationality	Australian/overseas visitor
Indigenous	Indigenous status
Ethnicity	Ethnicity
Missing from	Missing from (for example, own residence, mental institution)
Probable cause	Probable cause (voluntarily/involuntarily missing)
Length of time	Length of time missing
Drug/alcohol	History of drug and alcohol use
Mental illness	History of mental illness
n.a.	= Not available

On the basis of the above information, the AIC requested that information on missing persons for the period 1998–2006 be retrieved. This was not possible in any instance, nor was it possible to provide unit record data. The time period was then refined to include data for the financial year 2005–06. The following is a summary of the data that could be supplied by each police jurisdiction, The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service and the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service.

Australian Capital Territory

Table A2: Missing Persons Unit, Australian Federal Police <sup>a</sup>	
	2005–06
Total missing	1,078
Total males	504
Total females	574
Total young people	738
Total absconders	571
Total male absconders	234
Total female absconders	337
Total young absconders	430

a: Obtained from database

## New South Wales

**Table A3: Missing Persons Unit, New South Wales Police Force<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	9,788
Located	9,717
Total – males	5,080
Total – females	4,708
Total – young people	5,068
Highest age – males	(14 years old) 426
Highest age – females	(14 years old) 803
Second highest age – males	(13 years old) 342
Second highest age – females	(15 years old) 672
Third highest age – males	(15 years old) 270
Third highest age – females	(13 years old) 570
<i>Indicators<sup>b</sup></i>	
Mental health	2,598
Department of Community Service	1,589
Tourist	22
Homosexual	0
Cult/sect	0
Domestic	255
Gang related	1
Sex industry	9
Backpacker	0
Crime related	2
Drug related	19
Health related	278
Other	17
Suicidal	160
Hitch-hiker	0
Misadventure	27
Involuntary	3

a: Obtained from database

b: The statistics relating to indicators are a guide only and are not accurate. More than one indicator can be tagged for one missing person

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## Northern Territory

**Table A4: Missing Persons Unit, Northern Territory Police<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	431
Total males	207
Total females	224
Total young people	233
Total Indigenous	194
Mental health problems <sup>b</sup>	34

a: Obtained from database

b: If there was an active alert of 'may have a mental illness'

## Queensland

The Queensland Police Service only permits the release of verified statistics. Due to upgrading their missing persons procedures to a fully computerised system, missing persons statistics are not able to be verified or released at the present time. Therefore, all estimates presented in this report exclude persons reported missing to the Queensland Police Service, unless otherwise stated.

## South Australia

**Table A5: Missing Persons Investigation Section, South Australia Police<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	4,915
Total – males	2,532
Total – females	2,383
Total – young people	2,923
Missing from residence	2,311
Missing from public place	486
Missing from supportive care	512
Missing from mental institution	535
Missing from Families SA	821
Missing from workplace	24
Missing from educational facility	226
<i>Indicator</i>	
Domestic violence	20
Family conflict	590
Absconder	862 (95% <18)
Involuntary	4
Lost/wandered	170 (48% >65)
Event	10
Psychiatric	856

a: Obtained from database

## Tasmania

**Table A6: Missing Persons Unit, Tasmania Police<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	207
Total – males	113
Total – females	94

a: Obtained from database



## Victoria

**Table A7: Missing Persons Squad, Victoria Police<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	5,584
Total – males	2,801
Total – females	2,766
Total – young people	2,877
Aboriginal	95
Asian	185
Caucasian	3,998
Other/unspecified	1,306
<i>Probable cause</i>	
Domestic	398
Drowned	18
Lost	75
Own accord	3,136
Accidental	18
Suicidal	369
Suspicious	8
Other	201
Unspecified	1,361

a: Obtained from Annual Report

## Western Australia

**Table A8: Missing Persons Unit, Western Australia Police<sup>a</sup>**

	2005–06
Total missing	2,517
Total – males	1,265
Total – females	1,252
Total – young people	1,035
Mental absconders – male	212
Mental absconders – female	125
Male (Hague matters)	5
State wards – male	90
State wards – female	138

a: Obtained from database

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## Appendix 3: Case studies

Examples of case studies relating to non-police missing persons were provided by The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service, the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service and Aboriginal Link-Up Corporation. The case studies from the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service were obtained from their recent annual reports.

### The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service

#### Case 1

A man with an intellectual disability lives in a group home in the community. His case worker asked The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service to find members of his birth family, as the other residents have family but he does not have anyone. He gets upset when his housemates get visits and letters from their family members.

#### Case 2

An elderly woman born in 1918 received a letter two months ago from someone saying that he was her brother. Unfortunately she was about to go into hospital for surgery and did not think she would live so she burnt the letter. The lady had been brought up by another family and had been told her family name, but she had not told her deceased husband or children about her past. She phoned The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service asking whether it had sent the letter. It did not send the letter and checked with other possible agencies but they had not sent it either, so The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service offered to search for her brother. It was found she had two brothers and a sister but one of the brothers had died. The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service has details about the son of the deceased brother and is searching for him hoping he may want to meet his aunt and as well as his other relatives.

#### Case 3

A baby boy was four months old when his parents separated. He was raised by his father. Sixty years later the son asked The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service to search for his elderly mother as he had grown up an only child. His mother was delighted to be located, and her son now has brothers, sisters and a large extended family.

#### Case 4

In 1958 an eight-week-old girl came to Australia with her mother from the United Kingdom after her parents divorced. When she was 19 she decided to travel back to the United Kingdom to search for her father. He refused to meet her. She was devastated and returned

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to Australia. About that time her father told his new family about his estranged daughter and this sparked a keen interest in his youngest child, a boy. The girl wrote to her father again in 1986 asking if he would change his mind about contact but he refused. In 2002, after both his father and mother had died, the son started searching for his Australian sister. In 2004 The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service located her. The brother and sister met when he came to Australia in 2006.

## **Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation**

### *Case 1*

Mary was nine years old when she was forcibly removed. She was sent to a girls' home in Glebe until she was 11. Her records state that she then became wilful, insolent and slothful and ran away. When recaptured Mary was sent to Parramatta Girls' Home. Mary had five brothers and seven sisters, all of whom were taken and placed in various homes and Aboriginal training farms around the state. By the time Mary's living siblings had grown old enough to find each other, Mary still remained missing. There is no death listing for Mary in Australia.

### *Case 2*

Tessa is over 80 years old and has been known by at least 28 different aliases. Tessa is also well known to the NSW police, which have many of her aliases on record. Tessa's family has been looking for her since 1984. Centrelink In Touch searches have been made several times throughout Australia under all of her known aliases with no results. The Department of Community Services has no knowledge of her. Adoptions (FIS) cannot find any information about her and there has not been a death recorded in Australia for Tessa. Her family is still waiting. Tessa began using an alias when she was running from the Aboriginal Welfare Board and she also has an ingrained distrust for the police and any authority figure. Tessa has been on the run all her life but now is the time to come home.

### *Case 3*

Wayne is now 20 years old. When he was 17 years old, Wayne's mother threatened to call the Department of Community Services as he had been missing school and hanging out with the wrong crowd. Wayne was terrified. He had heard for years and years of horror stories about what his parents had gone through when they had been removed from their families. Wayne ran away. None of his friends could give his parents any information. Searches with Centrelink, youth shelters or extended family have not revealed Wayne's whereabouts. He has never made contact with any family member since his disappearance. His parents still live in hope.

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## Australian Red Cross Tracing Service

The following case studies are from the Australian Red Cross Tracing Service's recent annual reports.

### Case 1

When Jackson first spoke to his mother, he could hardly understand her through the crying. 'She was crying because she was hoping that maybe one day I would come back – every day she was expecting I would come back and now I was on the phone'. Thanks to the Australian Red Cross International Tracing Refugee and Asylum Seekers Service in Adelaide, Jackson's family was able to piece together their lives and reconnect after years of separation brought about by civil war.

Jackson and his mother were separated in 1993 when, with his mother unable to afford schooling after his father's death in the Congo conflict, Jackson went to live with his uncle. They escaped more fighting and fled to a refugee camp in Uganda in 2001, but lost touch with Jackson's mother and siblings. Jackson migrated to Australia as a refugee in 2004 with his uncle's family and with no knowledge of the welfare of the family he left behind.

After a school visit from the Red Cross, Jackson asked for their help to trace his mother. A case was opened and eventually Red Cross messages found their way across war-ravaged and fractured communities to his sister and mother in a remote village in Goma, on the border of Rwanda and the Congo, and then back to Jackson in Adelaide. Jackson is now able to make phone calls, send and receive Red Cross messages and photographs from his family in the Congo. To Jackson, this means everything. Now he is set on a career in medicine, is focused on helping to support his family and he hopes to see them all again in the future.

### Case 2

Fleeing her home and most of her family in conflict-ravaged Sudan, 16-year-old Joyce arrived at a refugee camp in 1992 with her uncle and siblings hoping to find a place of comfort and peace. Tragically, the camp was not peaceful at all, and Joyce was witness to scenes that many people would find impossible to fathom. After five long years, which included the death of her uncle in the camp, Joyce was shot four times, forcing her to flee once again. Wounded and travelling for 19 hours, she finally found her way to hospital. Months after her release from medical care, she and her siblings were granted resettlement in Australia. After a decade of uncertainty, Joyce and her siblings finally found peace in Australia, and it was here that she found out about the Red Cross International Tracing and Refugee Service. In June 2004, through the efforts of the world-wide tracing network, a Red Cross message was delivered to Joyce from her parents who had been located alive in the Sudan – her first contact with her parents in 12 years.

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## Appendix 4: Online questionnaire

### Part A: General

Please note: Before you commence the survey, please be advised that pressing the 'back' button on the toolbar will cause you to lose the information on the page you have just left. It is suggested that you complete the survey when you have time to answer all questions. If you have any problems, please feel free to call Jess Anderson at the Australian Institute of Criminology (02) 6260 9223, or email ([jessica.anderson@aic.gov.au](mailto:jessica.anderson@aic.gov.au)) to help you out.

- Q. 1      Your organisation name:
- Q. 2      Your organisation is:
- ☐ Statewide
  - ☐ Nationwide
  - ☐ Local
- Q. 3      In which jurisdiction do you work?
- ☐ Australian Capital Territory
  - ☐ New South Wales
  - ☐ Northern Territory
  - ☐ Queensland
  - ☐ South Australia
  - ☐ Tasmania
  - ☐ Victoria
  - ☐ Western Australia
- Q. 4      Is your location categorised as:
- ☐ Inner city
  - ☐ Metropolitan
  - ☐ Regional area
  - ☐ Rural area
  - ☐ Remote area
- Q. 5      What kind of service is your agency or organisation?
- ☐ Police (section B)
  - ☐ Tracing service (section C)
  - ☐ Other service (section D) (please specify) [                      ]

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## Part B: Police

This section requires information on police involvement in missing persons cases and the subsequent investigation.

- Q. 6\_A For the past year, please indicate what proportion of reports/referrals to your unit were through:

*(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice.  
Select only one choice per topic.)*

**Local police**

- ( ) Almost all of the referrals ( ) Many of the referrals ( ) Some of the referrals  
( ) Not many of the referrals ( ) None of the referrals

**Direct phone calls**

- ( ) Almost all of the referrals ( ) Many of the referrals ( ) Some of the referrals  
( ) Not many of the referrals ( ) None of the referrals

**People coming into the unit**

- ( ) Almost all of the referrals ( ) Many of the referrals ( ) Some of the referrals  
( ) Not many of the referrals ( ) None of the referrals

**Police in other jurisdictions**

- ( ) Almost all of the referrals ( ) Many of the referrals ( ) Some of the referrals  
( ) Not many of the referrals ( ) None of the referrals

- Q. 7 Please list any other means that someone may report a missing persons case to your unit.

- Q. 8 Name three critical factors that are used to assess missing persons cases.

- Q. 9\_A For the past year, indicate how often the referrals/reports were by:

**Police**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

**A friend**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

**Family**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

**Place of work**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

**Bank or financial institution**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

**Centrelink**

- ( ) All of them ( ) Very often ( ) Sometimes ( ) Not often ( ) None of them

- Q. 10 Please list who else may report a person as missing to your unit.

---

Q. 11\_A Please indicate how important these factors are in assessing a missing persons case.

*(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice.*

*Select only one choice per topic.)*

**Age – child**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Age – teenage**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Age – over 55**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Sex**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Previous history of going missing**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Length of time they have been missing**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Alzheimer's disease/dementia**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Intellectual disability**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Mental illness**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Alcohol/drug problems**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Financial problems**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**History of institutionalisation**

( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important

( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

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**Natural disaster**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Was in a conflict area/war zone**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Possibility of a misadventure/accident**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**History of self harm/suicide ideation**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

- Q. 12\_A How do you find out if the above factors apply in a missing persons case?  
(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice.  
Select only one choice per topic.)

**Friends**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Colleagues**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Relatives**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Health services**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Banks/financial institutions**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Criminal history check**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

**Missing persons records**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often ☐ No, never  
☐ Don't know/unsure

- Q. 13 If there are any other important factors, please specify below.



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Q. 14\_A When people go missing, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in your experience how common are the following factors:

*(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice.*

*Select only one choice per topic.)*

**Domestic/family violence**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Child physical/sexual abuse**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Alcohol problems**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Drug problems**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Mental health issues**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Sexuality (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender)**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Child abduction**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Thrown out of home**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Run away from home**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Work problems**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Financial problems**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Culturally and linguistically diverse background**

( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common

( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

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**Indigenous**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Misadventure/accident**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**History of self harm/suicide ideation**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Possible victim of crime**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

- Q. 15 Do you ask specific questions to establish whether missing persons are affected by the above risk factors?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 16 Given the factors you have identified above, are there any particular factors that you feel put some people more at risk of going missing than others?
- Q. 17 In your experience, what issues are family, friends or acquaintances of a missing person most reluctant to disclose during an investigation? (Name three.)
- Q. 18 Do you provide any support service information to those affected by a missing person when they report the person missing? (Please tick all that apply and specify where appropriate.)  
☐ Referral to counselling [                      ]  
☐ Referral to specific services (e.g. mental health, youth support, aged care etc.)  
[                      ]  
☐ Pamphlets outlining services available  
☐ Other, please specify [                      ]
- Q. 19 After the missing person has been located, do you provide the located person with any of the following? (Please tick all that apply and specify where appropriate.)  
☐ Counselling [                      ]  
☐ Referral to specific services (e.g. mental health, youth support, aged care etc.)  
☐ Pamphlets outlining services available  
☐ Other, please specify [                      ]

- 
- Q. 20 After the missing person has been located, do you provide families/friends with any of the following? (Please tick all that apply and specify where appropriate.)
- ☐ Counselling [ ]
- ☐ Referral to specific services [ ]
- ☐ Pamphlets outlining services available
- ☐ Other, please specify [ ]
- Q. 21 What barriers exist when trying to access information about a missing person from another organisation/source?
- Q. 22\_A Do you find that any of the following hinder your ability to access information in missing persons cases?
- (For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice. Select only one choice per topic.)*
- Commonwealth Privacy Act**
- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
- State or territory privacy laws**
- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
- Professional code of conduct**
- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
- Agency policy**
- ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
- Q. 23 Once a missing person has been located, are steps in place to reduce the likelihood of that person going missing again?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- Q. 24 If yes, what are the steps?
- Q. 25 Can you describe any specific examples of good practices in delivery of missing persons services?
- Q. 26 What policies/procedures do you work with when investigating missing persons cases? (Tick all that apply and specify where possible.)
- ☐ Departmental guidelines
- ☐ Specific Acts
- ☐ Other
- Q. 27 If you have any agreements with agencies outside the police in your area to help in missing persons cases, please state the organisation and nature of this below:
- Q. 28 What is currently in place to exchange information nationally on missing persons?

- 
- Q. 29 Please list three things that you believe would improve the effectiveness of missing persons investigations.
- Q. 30 What training do you think you require when dealing with those affected by missing persons?
- Q. 31 Is your organisation involved in other activities that address missing persons issues?
- ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ Don't know
- Q. 32 If yes please provide a brief list.

## Part C: Tracing services/agencies

This section requires information on the initial missing person report to tracing services/agencies and the subsequent search.

- Q. 33\_A For the past year, please indicate what proportion of reports/referrals to your unit were from:
- Local police**
- ☐ Frequently ☐ Sometimes ☐ Not often ☐ Never ☐ Don't know/unsure
- Direct phone calls**
- ☐ Frequently ☐ Sometimes ☐ Not often ☐ Never ☐ Don't know/unsure
- People coming into the unit**
- ☐ Frequently ☐ Sometimes ☐ Not often ☐ Never ☐ Don't know/unsure
- Police in other jurisdictions**
- ☐ Frequently ☐ Sometimes ☐ Not often ☐ Never ☐ Don't know/unsure
- Q. 34 Please list any other means that someone may report a missing persons case to your organisation.
- Q. 35 Name three critical factors that are used to assess missing persons cases.
- Q. 36 Please list who may report a person as missing to your organisation.
- Q. 37\_A Please indicate how important these factors are in assessing a missing persons case:
- Age – child**
- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important
- ☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

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**Age – teenage**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Age – over 55**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Sex**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Previous history of going missing**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Length of time they have been missing**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Alzheimer's disease/dementia**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Intellectual disability**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Mental illness**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Alcohol/drug problems**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Financial problems**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**History of institutionalisation**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Natural disaster**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Was in a conflict area/war zone**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

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**Possibility of a misadventure/accident**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**History of self harm/suicide ideation**

- ☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

Q. 38\_A How do you find out if the above factors apply in a missing persons case?

**Friends**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

**Colleagues**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

**Relatives**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

**Health services**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

**Banks/financial institutions**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

**Missing persons records**

- ☐ Yes, frequently ☐ Yes, sometimes ☐ Yes, but not often  
☐ No, never ☐ Don't know/unsure

Q. 39\_A When people go missing, either voluntarily or involuntarily, in your experience how common are the following factors:  
*(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice.  
Select only one choice per topic.)*

**Domestic/family violence**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Child physical/sexual abuse**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

**Alcohol problems**

- ☐ Very common ☐ Somewhat common ☐ Not very common  
☐ Not common at all ☐ Don't know/not applicable

---

**Drug problems**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Mental health issues**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Sexuality (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender)**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Child abduction**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Thrown out of home**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Run away from home**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Work problems**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Financial problems**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Culturally and linguistically diverse background**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Indigenous**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Misadventure/accident**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**History of self harm/suicide ideation**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Possible victim of crime**

- ( ) Very common ( ) Somewhat common ( ) Not very common  
( ) Not common at all ( ) Don't know/not applicable

- 
- Q. 40 Do you ask specific questions to establish whether missing persons are affected by the above risk factors?  
( ) Yes  
( ) No
- Q. 41 Given the factors you have identified above, are there any particular factors that you feel put some people more at risk of going missing than others?
- Q. 42 In your experience, what issues are family, friends or acquaintances of a missing person most reluctant to disclose during a search? (Name three)
- Q. 43 Do you provide any support service information/counselling to those affected by a missing person when they report the person missing? (Tick all that apply and specify where possible.)  
*(Type an X between the brackets preceding each choice you wish to select.)*  
*Choose all that apply)*  
[ ] Referral to counselling [                      ]  
[ ] Referral to specific services (e.g. mental health, youth support, aged care etc.)  
[ ] Pamphlets outlining services available  
[ ] Other [                      ]
- Q. 44 After the missing person has been located, do you provide the located person with any of the following? (Tick all that apply and specify where possible.)  
*(Type an X between the brackets preceding each choice you wish to select.)*  
*Choose all that apply)*  
[ ] Counselling [                      ]  
[ ] Referral to specific services (e.g. mental health, youth support, aged care etc.)  
[ ] Pamphlets outlining services available  
[ ] Other [                      ]
- Q. 45 After the missing person has been located, do you provide families/friends with any of the following? (Tick all that apply and specify where possible.)  
[ ] Counselling [                      ]  
[ ] Referral to specific services (e.g. mental health, youth support, aged care etc.)  
[ ] Pamphlets outlining services available  
[ ] Other [                      ]
- Q. 46 What barriers exist when trying to access information about a missing person from another organisation/source?



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Q. 47\_A Do you find that any of the following hinder your ability to access information in missing persons cases?

**Commonwealth Privacy Act**

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

**State or territory privacy laws**

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

**Professional code of conduct**

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

**Agency policy**

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Q. 48 Once a missing person has been located, are steps in place to reduce the likelihood of that person going missing again?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

Q. 49 If yes, what are the steps?

Q. 50 Can you describe any specific examples of good practices in delivery of missing persons services?

Q. 51 Does your agency/organisation have policies/procedures in place that determine criteria for pursuing a missing persons search and the subsequent practice involved?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

Q. 52 If you have any agreements with agencies outside your organisation in your area to help in missing persons cases, please state the organisation and nature of this below:

Q. 53 What is currently in place to exchange information nationally on missing persons?

Q. 54 Please list three things that you believe would improve the effectiveness of missing persons investigations:

Q. 55 What training do you think you require when dealing with those affected by missing persons?

- 
- Q. 56 Is your organisation involved in other activities that address missing persons issues?  
(Type an X between the brackets preceding your choice. Select only one choice.)  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Don't know
- Q. 57 If yes please provide a brief list.

**Part D: This section requires information from counselling/support/health services that may be involved with people at risk of going missing, and which also provide counselling/support services for families/friends/acquaintances of missing persons. They may also provide services for missing persons after they have been located.**

- Q. 58 Has your service had any involvement in missing persons cases?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Don't know
- Q. 59 In what capacity has your service been involved? (Tick all that apply.)  
☐ Assist in locating missing persons  
☐ Assist in risk assessment  
☐ Assist in providing support for missing persons (e.g. as a referral service)  
☐ Assist in providing support for those affected by missing persons  
☐ To my knowledge, we have not been involved  
☐ Other (specify) [                      ]
- Q. 60\_A Please indicate how important these factors are in assessing a case if a person is suspected of being a missing person:  
(For each topic below, type an X between the brackets preceding your choice. Select only one choice per topic.)
- Age – child**  
☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable
- Age – teenage**  
☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable
- Age – over 55**  
☐ Very important ☐ Important ☐ Sometimes important  
☐ Not very important ☐ Don't know/not applicable

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**Sex**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Previous history of going missing**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Length of time they have been missing**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Alzheimer's disease/dementia**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Intellectual disability**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Mental illness**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Alcohol/drug problems**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Financial problems**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**History of institutionalisation**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Natural disaster**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Was in a conflict area/war zone**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**Possibility of a misadventure/accident**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

**History of self harm/suicide ideation**

- ( ) Very important ( ) Important ( ) Sometimes important  
( ) Not very important ( ) Don't know/not applicable

- 
- Q. 61 How does your service identify individuals at risk of becoming missing (either voluntarily or involuntarily)?
- Q. 62 Does your agency have any policy, procedures or protocols to deal with people who are at risk of becoming missing?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Don't know
- Q. 63 Are we able to access a copy?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 64 What strategies would your organisation employ to prevent one of your clients from voluntarily or involuntarily going missing?
- Q. 65 Can you think of any strategies related to your organisation's work that could be implemented to prevent people from going missing?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 66 If yes, please specify:
- Q. 67 Do you currently provide any counselling/support services for those who are affected by missing persons?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 68 Can you provide details of these services?
- Q. 69 If you do not provide counselling/support services to those affected by missing persons, do you refer to other counselling services or support groups?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 70 Which ones?
- Q. 71 Can you list any barriers in accessing any information about a missing person from another organisation/source?
- Q. 72 Can you describe any specific examples of good practices in delivery of missing persons services?
- Q. 73 Please name three things that you think would help improve services to those affected by missing persons.

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- Q. 74 Do you have any policies and/or procedures in place to facilitate working with other agencies?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No
- Q. 75 Please list the agencies you have an agreement with, and the nature of that agreement (e.g. a partnership, protocols, a memorandum of understanding [MoU] etc.).
- Q. 76\_A Do the following prevent you from accessing information in missing persons cases?  
**Commonwealth Privacy Act**  
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know  
**State or territory privacy laws**  
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know  
**Professional code of conduct**  
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know  
**Agency policy**  
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know
- Q. 77 Do you feel you need any training to help people who are at risk of going missing?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Don't know
- Q. 78 Please list what type of training would be beneficial.
- Q. 79 Is your organisation involved in other activities that address missing persons issues?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Don't know
- Q. 80 If yes please provide a brief list.
- Q. 81 If there is anything else to do with missing persons services that you would like to add, or feel that we have missed in this survey, please feel free to comment below:

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## Appendix 5: Questionnaire for families and friends of missing persons

1. (a) When you first became aware that your family member had gone missing, did you immediately inform the police?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
  
(b) If no, how long did you wait?  
  
(c) Why did you wait?  
  
2. How did the police respond to your report?  
  
3. How satisfied were you with the police response?  
☐ Very satisfied  
☐ Satisfied  
☐ Not at all satisfied  
  
4. How could the police response have been improved?  
  
5. How well informed do you feel you were kept at all stages of the investigation?  
☐ Very well informed  
☐ Well informed  
☐ Not at all well informed  
  
6. (a) As well as the investigation to locate your family member, did you feel the need for any other type of support?  
☐ Counselling  
☐ Emotional support  
☐ Practical support  
☐ Information  
☐ Practical help with day-to-day coping  
☐ Connection with other families who have been through a similar experience  
☐ Other  
  
(b) Could you give details of the type of support you feel you needed?  
  
7. Did your needs change during the time your family member went missing?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No

If yes, at what stages in the process did you have specific needs?

- 
8. Now that your family member has been missing for a longer period of time, what sort of assistance do you feel you need at the present time?
9. When your family member first went missing, were you aware of support/counselling services for yourself and other members of your family?
- ☐ Yes  
☐ No
10. If you were aware of support/counselling services, what type of services were they?
- ☐ Counselling  
☐ Emotional support  
☐ Practical support  
☐ Information  
☐ Practical help with day-to-day coping  
☐ Connection with other families who have been through a similar experience  
☐ Other
11. If you weren't aware of support/counselling services, how were you made aware that they exist?
- ☐ Police  
☐ National Missing Persons Coordination Centre (formerly National Missing Persons Unit)  
☐ Other
12. Is there information that you feel the general public need to know about missing persons? How best could this be achieved?
13. Do you think the media have a particular role to play in missing persons cases?
- ☐ Yes  
☐ No
- If yes, what type of role?
14. How do you think the media role could be enhanced?
15. Can you tell me of anything that you feel would have made things easier for you in terms of the investigation procedures at any point?
16. Can you tell me of anything that you feel would have improved the way in which you have coped with your family member going missing?
17. How could you have been helped more?

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## Appendix 6: Consultations with key stakeholders

Interviews were held with the following organisations:

### Australian Government

- CrimTrac
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police

### New South Wales

- Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit Counselling Service, Attorney General's Department of New South Wales
- Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service
- Mental Health Association of New South Wales
- Missing Persons Committee NSW Inc.
- Missing Persons Unit, New South Wales Police Force
- Mission Australia, Charles Chambers Court
- The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service
- Wayside Chapel
- Wesley Mission

### Northern Territory

- Australian Red Cross Tracing Service
- Larrakia Nation Community Harmony Outreach Project
- Missing Persons Unit, Northern Territory Police
- The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service

### Queensland

- Australian Red Cross Tracing Service
- Multicultural Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing
- The Salvation Army Family Tracing Service



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## **Victoria**

- Open Family
- Victoria Police
- Youth Substance Abuse Service

## **Tasmania**

- Chance on Main



# Research and Public Policy Series

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Missing persons in Australia is a complex field, with no single service responsible for investigations and support for those affected. While the coordination shared by police and nongovernment agencies is crucial in responding to cases, limitations in collecting and recording data hamper a complete understanding of risk factors that can inform good practice. These limitations are evident at the national level, where knowledge of the characteristics and patterns of missing persons is scant. Certain groups in the community, and individual factors, contribute to the risk of people going missing. This information is necessary to develop strategies that focus on improving preventative measures, early intervention, support services and referral mechanisms.

This report updates existing data on missing persons across Australia in 2005–06 to identify at-risk groups. It presents information on good practice from preventative to support measures and outlines policies, practice and research directions. A current snapshot of missing persons is shown by national estimates, demographic characteristics and reporting. Family dysfunction and psychological reasons for going missing are complemented by details on searching, support/counselling services and intervention/prevention practices. Improving data quality, risk assessment procedures, specialised training and education of all stakeholders, and inter-agency coordination are key priorities.